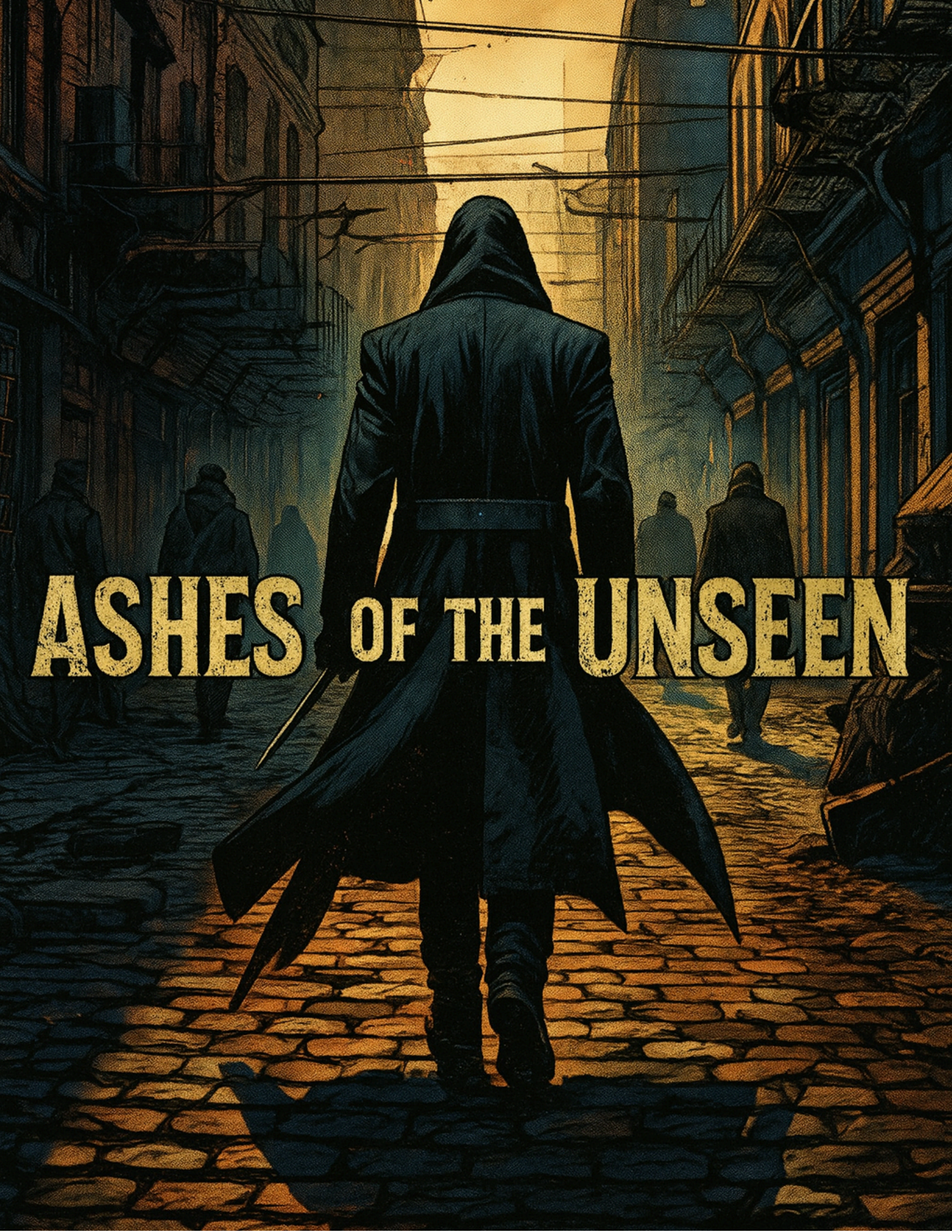
ASHES OF THE UNSEEN

About This Book

Ashes of the Unseen is a tale born from a love of steampunk invention, spectral hauntings, and arcane mysteries — woven into a story of outlaws who stumble into destiny. Set in the fog-drenched city of Doskvol, it follows the Crows: a chaotic band of thieves whose choices ripple far beyond coin and survival. Drawn into the city's tangled web of crime, corruption, and prophecy, they find themselves not only fighting for their lives but for the fate of the city itself.

Written with the pulse of episodic television, each chapter carries the thrill of discovery, danger, and dread — like a "villain of the week" unfolding against a larger story of fate and family. Readers will find echoes of *Blades in the Dark* and *City of Mist*, alongside the high drama of *Game of Thrones* and the strange magic of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Whether you come for the invention, the ghosts, or the chaos of the Crows, this is the beginning of a saga that promises even greater mysteries and revelations still to come.

Ashes of the Unseen
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Dedication

For my family, who helped bring this world to life by playing at the table with me.

Table of contents

Chapter 1: Knock once, run forever.....**5**
Chapter 2: A Symphony of Schemes..... **30**
News: Mystery Unfolds at Local Science Fair: Bounty Hunter Arrested, Invention Unveiled Amidst Chaos..... **50**
Chapter 3: Skyward Skirmish: A Race Above Doskvol..... **53**
Chapter 4: A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey.....**69**
News: Chaos Erupts in Doskvol: Monsters, Fire, and Death at Gaddwick Station.....**89**
Chapter 5: The Forgotten Relic - Part 1..... **92**
Chapter 6: The Forgotten Relic - Part 2..... **107**
Story: The Unforgiven Path of Constant.....**123**
Chapter 7: The Draft Under the Door..... **125**
Chapter 8: The Deadland Express..... **135**
News: Terror at the Door of Doskvol: Train Hijacked in Broad Daylight.....**153**
Story: Shadows of the Underworld..... **155**
Chapter 9: The Black Marrow Infiltration..... **157**
Dramatis Personae & Factions at a Glance.....**185**
The Chapter List..... **187**

Chapter 1: Knock once, run forever

Doskvol doesn’t sleep. It festers.

By day, the city breathes thick coal smoke and fog—the two curling together into something more permanent, more alive. The soot settles into every crevice: on the rooftops of leaning brick tenements, on the cloaks of dockhands hauling crates of stolen goods, on the faces of street children who haven’t known clean air in years. At night, the glow of gaslamps cuts through the mist like daggers, making every shadow deeper, every alley darker. It’s a city that lives in twilight, where the sun never fully breaks through and the moon is always watching. The skyline is a battlefield between crumbling cathedrals and looming smokestacks, old gods and new machines. Between them stretch cables, walkways, and pipes like veins in a dying beast. And underfoot? A second city. Older. Forgotten. Tunnels and catacombs wind beneath the cobblestones—some built for the living, others not. Smugglers move contraband through collapsed sewer lines. Cultists chant in forgotten chapels. And in the coldest, deepest places, ghosts walk, drawn to the echoes of unfinished lives. The people of Doskvol live elbow to elbow but trust no one. The noble elite wear silk and smirk behind crystal glasses in their manors up in Gloamhaven. The workers below breathe poison and break their backs in coal refineries and electroplasm mills. The middle class, what little remains of it, clings to dignity by its fingernails—often slipping into vice, bribery, or quiet desperation just to stay afloat. Immigrants from across the Shattered Isles fill the cracks in the city’s social order, and none are more determined—or more feared—than the Skarrenfolk, war-weary refugees with nothing left to lose. Technology in Doskvol is a twisted marvel. Steam engines chug beside arcane generators, and the ghost-fueled electroplasm hums in wires like nervous energy waiting to be unleashed. It's innovation born of desperation, stitched together with rust and ritual. The most prized inventions are those that blur the line between science and the supernatural—possessed lanterns that glow with sentience, pistols that whisper secrets when fired, clockwork limbs imbued with stolen spirit energy. And always, there’s the quiet truth: every magical thing costs someone, somewhere, a little piece of their soul. Law and order exist here in theory, not in practice. The Imperial Military Police patrol in crisp uniforms, but most citizens know better than to expect protection. Corruption is baked into the institution, with bribes, threats, and favors changing hands faster than court rulings. Their captain, Morian Ishtar, is as ruthless as he is effective—a rising star with a public smile and a private kill list. His Espiritas Police division is worse: masked, unfeeling, and coldly efficient, their job is to dispose of corpses before the ghosts rise. They say the Espiritas Police can sense a death before the blood has cooled. And in this city, there’s always blood cooling somewhere.

Tucked into the ragged edge of Crow’s Ward, where the crooked buildings leaned like gossiping drunks and the canals ran thick with ash and forgotten things, there sat a house the city had given up on. Brickwork blistered by acid rain, a collapsed chimney spilling soot into the second floor, and a door that hung just slightly ajar—as if it had been opened in a hurry and never quite shut again. No landlord came here. No lawman knocked. Even the rats seemed cautious, as if the place itself had teeth. But behind its cracked windows and sagging eaves, three figures had made themselves at home—if not by comfort, then by mutual necessity. They weren’t a crew.

Not officially. Just three desperate souls with nowhere better to be and too many enemies to go alone. They didn't even know what to call themselves yet.

The oldest among them went by Rabbit's Foot, a nickname earned more in reputation than truth. He was quiet in the way a candle burns just before it gutters out—always watching, always calculating, like a man who knew how easily luck turned. He rarely smiled, but when he did, it meant something was about to go terribly right… or terribly wrong. Then there was Jack—"the Boy," as he was known in the street corners of Hexspire and the card dens of Silkbend. Greedy, clever, and endlessly charming in that way pickpockets often are, Jack had a gift for knowing what people wanted and how to convince them he already had it. He talked fast, moved faster, and carried a deck of cards he claimed could tell the future—though more often than not, they seemed to only tell who he was planning to cheat next. And last was Harry. Young. Too young. Eager, clumsy, wide-eyed like he hadn't yet learned that in Doskvol, light draws shadows, and hope gets you killed. But there was something different about Harry. Something dangerous. He carried a warmth in his fingertips, a whisper of spectral flame just beneath the skin, as if he had swallowed the spark of some old, forgotten power. He wanted to prove himself. And that made him the most dangerous of the three. They had found the house not through planning, but through accident. Rabbit's Foot had spotted the place first, during a fog-thick night after a job gone sour. It was far from the patrol routes, and the neighbors had the good sense to mind their own business. The old place groaned with every gust of wind, and the rain made a permanent tattoo against the roof tiles—but it was dry, and in Doskvol, that was more than most could ask for. It had no table, so they'd stacked crates. No beds, so they'd claimed corners. The only light came from an oil lantern Jack had nicked from a dockworker's satchel and a spectral glowstone Rabbit's Foot kept close but never explained. They cooked over a dented stove, when they cooked at all. Mostly, they drank cheap gin and made plans. Not grand ones—at least not yet. They were still feeling each other out. Still deciding whether this alliance would last longer than the week. But the city didn't wait. And neither did the job that was coming.

The old house wheezed like a dying man in the fog, every gust of wind pressing its fingers into the loose shutters and splitting floorboards. Crow's Ward's abandoned fringe was full of places like this—homes left behind during evictions, gang raids, or mysterious disappearances. This one had no known owner, no neighbors curious enough to ask questions. Just three would-be criminals and the dust of its former life. The sitting room was a dismal affair, lit only by slanted rays of gray morning light stabbing through cracks in the boarded windows. Faded wallpaper peeled like sunburned skin. Damp had turned the air thick and sour with mold, and something old and vegetal squished unpleasantly beneath their boots. A pile of broken furniture leaned against one wall, and cobwebs crowned the high ceiling like lace worn by the dead.

"I'm just saying," muttered the boy near the door, arms crossed tightly, "this place smells like a drowned library."

Harry looked like he didn't belong there—not yet. His striped shirt was too clean, his slacks too pressed, his glasses recently mended. But there was something strange behind his eyes, like the afterimage of a spark still glowing. He had the aura of a boy who'd stumbled into the arcane before learning to fear it. Slung over one shoulder was a worn satchel stuffed with scribbled glyphs, potion ingredients, and a fire-conjuring ring tied crudely to a loop with string. He ran a hand through his messy hair, scowling up at the sagging ceiling. "Are we really going to *live* here?"

"Of course we are," came the cheerful reply from the other side of the room.

Jack "the Boy" sat on a crate like it was a throne, one leg dangling lazily over the edge, a club resting against the side of his boot. He looked like trouble dipped in charm: a mane of unkempt dark hair framed a face half-hidden beneath a scruffy beard and wild grin. His coat, long and

faded from too many years on the streets, fluttered slightly even indoors—as if it, too, was up to something. He flipped a playing card between his fingers with the grace of a stage magician, his dark eyes always scanning, always calculating, always amused.

“A bit of scrubbing, a few stolen linens, maybe a flower in the corner—this’ll be grand,” Jack said. “Cozy, even. Like a haunted cottage, but with better acoustics and fewer judgmental ghosts.”

Harry gave him a dubious look. “You don’t *hear* the screaming?”

“No,” Jack said, deadpan. “But if it starts harmonizing, I’m forming a quartet.”

“It’s serviceable,” came a third voice—low, calm, and precise. “More importantly, it’s off the ledgers.”

Sitting cross-legged on an overturned barrel was a man who looked like a scholar caught mid-wager with fate. His suit was once fine, but worn soft at the cuffs, and a bone-white charm hung from a chain at his wrist. His coat, midnight blue and threadbare at the hem, was carefully pressed, even in disrepair. He held an iron-bound ledger on one knee, pen tapping gently against its edge. They called him Rabbit’s Foot. Everyone did. He never gave another name—not even to these two. Rabbit’s glasses glinted in the half-light, reflecting the room like a broken mirror. His gaze was unsettlingly still. “This property hasn’t been claimed since the oil riots of ’53. The previous deedholder vanished without heirs. As far as city records go, it’s a ghost. That makes it ours—until someone decides they want it more.”

Harry blinked at him. “That sounds… illegal.”

Rabbit didn’t look up. “So is breathing on the wrong day in Doskvol. Pick your battles.”

Jack threw back his head and laughed. “That’s the spirit, wizard boy! We’re not decorators, we’re thieves. Scrappy, opportunistic, semi-talented thieves who happen to be alive at the same time. You don’t ignore a sign like that.”

Harry raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You think our meeting was destiny?”

“I think,” Rabbit said softly, closing his book, “that survival creates strange partnerships. But luck… luck might keep them together.” Silence hung for a moment—heavy, but not unpleasant. Rain started to tap against the boarded windows, soft and persistent. A raven cawed once from the chimney above.

Harry finally dropped his bag beside the hearth with a reluctant grunt. “Fine. But I’m not cleaning the upstairs bathroom. Something in there growled at me.”

“Fair,” Jack said, stretching like a cat. “But if it talks back, I call dibs on recruiting it.”

Rabbit stood up, brushing the dust from his trousers. “This will serve. Not just as shelter, but as something far more valuable in this city—anonymity.”

“Now all we need,” Jack added, cracking his knuckles, “is a job.”

As if summoned by the idea itself, a soft rustle echoed from Rabbit’s coat. He reached into the inner lining and pulled out a folded slip of parchment, the wax seal already cracked. His lips curved into a faint, unreadable smile.

“No name,” he said, holding it up. “Just an offer of coin and a very curious proposition.”

Jack leaned in eagerly. “What kind of proposition?”

Rabbit’s gaze turned distant.

“Break someone out of Ironscar. Death row. Tonight.”

Rabbit's Foot’s voice fell over the room like a shuffled omen, soft but impossible to ignore. Jack let out a low whistle, sitting back on the edge of a battered windowsill, the city’s distant fog curling around the frame behind him.

“Well, that’s bold,” he said, brows raised. “Ironscar’s the kind of place that eats people and forgets they ever existed.”

Rabbit tapped the parchment once against his palm. “Whoever sent this thinks we’re either desperate… or expendable.”

Harry, standing by the crumbling fireplace, hesitated. “The thing is... I don’t think it’s Ironscar.”

Both Rabbit and Jack turned to him at once. “What?” Jack asked, eyes narrowing.

Harry scratched the back of his neck. “You two assumed Ironscar. But I never said that.”

Rabbit tilted his head. “Alright. Explain.”

Harry took a breath. “Last night, near the flooded park—I was looking for glowmoss—I ran into someone. Looked like a street drunk at first, but... not really. Older man, well-dressed but frayed around the edges. Like someone out of place, you know? Fancy coat, plum cravat, satchel full of papers. Smelled like ink and seawater.”

Jack blinked. “You’re telling me a homeless *professor* gave you this?”

“Didn’t just give it to me,” Harry said. “He said it was meant for *us*. Called me by name. Introduced himself as Márcio Keel.”

Rabbit’s brow furrowed. “Never heard that name.”

“Me neither,” Jack added, arms crossed. “And I know all the good conmen and all the bad ghosts.”

Harry pressed on. “He wasn’t begging. He was... watching me. Like he *knew* something. Said we were walking sideways through fate. Then handed me the letter and told me if we were ready for change, the door was already open.”

Rabbit's Foot leaned forward, suddenly more serious. “And the prison?”

Harry nodded. “He said it’s not Ironscar. Said the man we’re supposed to break out is being held under the Governor’s House. Some secret black site, built beneath the ballroom.”

Jack barked a laugh. “What, like a dungeon under the wine cellar?”

“I’m not joking,” Harry said. “Keel said real enemies of the state don’t go to Ironscar. They vanish underground. No trial. No records. Just disappear.”

Rabbit leaned back, digesting it. “That... makes a disturbing kind of sense.”

“None of this makes *sense*,” Jack muttered. “It creates *opportunity.* We’re being offered a job to break into the most fortified place in Doskvol—and you’re saying the payment is what, coin?”

Rabbit unfolded the rest of the parchment, running a finger along the ink. “And information,” he murmured. “Access to something old. Something the Unseen may have once tried to get their hands on.”

Jack’s grin returned. “Well, when you put it like that...”

“Then we’ll do what we always do,” Rabbit said. “Step lightly. Look twice. And prepare for everything.”

Harry’s hand closed around the ring at his finger, and the flicker of ghostlight sparked to life for just a moment between his knuckles.

Jack cracked his knuckles. “Looks like we’re going to a party.”

The next few days passed like ghosts whispering through old brick. Dust hung in the air like a curse, stirred with every bootstep as Jack, Rabbit's Foot, and Harry took to the abandoned manor with broom, crowbar, and stubborn optimism. The house had clearly once belonged to someone important—arched doorways, intricate moldings, and a hand-carved banister that curled like a vine around the central staircase. But time had gnawed away at it. Moss crept between the cracks of the wooden floorboards, and damp patches bloomed on the walls like bruises. Wallpaper hung in tatters. A bird’s nest had claimed the upper corner of the fireplace. Jack pried boards off the windows with the same flair he brought to a con, working in bursts of energy between lazy smokes. His dusky leather coat lay tossed over a broken armchair, revealing the scuffed shirt beneath and a knife tucked into his belt. “There’s potential here,” he kept muttering with a smirk, his eyes flicking between the hearth, the high-beamed ceiling, and most of all—the enormous stone staircase spiraling down into the manor’s cavernous basement. “Smells like rot now, sure. But give me a few weeks, some decent coin flow… and this place’ll sing. I’m talking black-market poker nights. Maybe a rotating auction house. Hell—pop-up bar with spirit-chased cocktails.” Harry, sleeves rolled and hair a wild tangle, poked at a moldy curtain with his conjuring ring aglow. “If we survive the ghost mold, maybe,” he muttered, wiping dust from his glasses. “Or we all get cursed and die in our sleep.” Rabbit's Foot, who had just swept out the hallway with methodical precision, cast a sidelong glance. “Then I suppose we better make the most of the week.” By the end of the third night, they'd carved livable space from the rot. The walls still wept moisture, and the wind still sighed through cracked tiles—but now there were cots against the walls, a battered table near the fire, and crates stolen from docks serving as chairs. Jack had even unearthed a faded red carpet and insisted on rolling it out, claiming it “added class.” The room smelled like old wood smoke, candle wax, and a faint, ever-present undertone of mildew. Still, it was theirs.

Rabbit's Foot returned late that night, coat damp with canal water and fingers ink-stained. He carried a scroll tucked under his arm, brittle and yellowed with time. Without a word, he spread it across the long oaken table, lit the surrounding candles, and pinned the corners down with bone dice and a heavy metal pocket watch. “The Governor’s House,” he said, brushing soot from the margin. “Commissioned seventy years ago by an architect who believed in secrets more than symmetry. Baroque layout. Grand halls, imperial vanity, but the foundation’s like an onion—layered and full of rot.”

The scroll revealed a sprawling estate drawn in elegant ink: east and west wings, a central dome, multiple entrances, and paths leading to courtyards, gardens, and stables. The ink had faded, but the detail remained—enough for a plan.

Jack leaned in, dragging a chair beside Rabbit's. "It's like a palace crossed with a labyrinth," he said, eyes lighting up.

Rabbit nodded, tapping near a junction just beneath the west ballroom. "Here. This section. See how it's boxed in? No doors. No vents. No windows. But structurally, the space exists."

Harry squinted. "That's where they're keeping him?"

"If I were hiding a man the city wants forgotten," Rabbit murmured, "this is where I'd put him. Beneath the ballroom. Hidden behind servants' walls and silence."

Jack whistled, already spinning the angles in his head. "Alright, so we just crash a governor's estate, break into a secret prison no one admits exists, and vanish with a corpse-in-waiting. Easy."

"We're not crashing," Rabbit corrected. "We're being invited. We won't need to sneak past a masquerade or charm our way through a servant's door," he said, finger tracing the main entry hall. "We walk in."

Jack, slouched sideways in a cracked armchair with a pipe dangling from his lips, raised a brow. "Just stroll in through the Governor's front gates, knock on the bloody door, and ask for a tour? Are we robbing a museum or breaking into a prison?"

Rabbit smiled faintly, and tapped the side of his nose. "We're not thieves today. We're family. Concerned relatives. And one of us," he added, shifting his gaze to Harry, "has the key to making it believable."

Harry, seated cross-legged on the floor with his spellbook open on his lap, looked up nervously. "You mean... Márcio?"

Rabbit nodded. "He'll vouch for us. Says he's arranged everything to get us through the door—at least as far as the outer offices."

Jack sat up, smoke curling past his grin. "What's our story, then?"

"We're there to see our cousin," Rabbit said. "Jack Norril. A poor, misunderstood soul wrongfully held without trial. We demand answers."

"And if they call our bluff?" Harry asked, adjusting his enchanted glasses, which glinted in the dim candlelight.

"Then we improvise," Jack said, already rising and stretching his shoulders. "Been a while since I talked my way out of a cell. Let's just hope I don't have to talk my way into one first."

They spent the rest of the day readying themselves. Harry scrawled arcane glyphs on parchment slips, stuffing them into his satchel with jittery fingers. Jack ran drills in the basement with his club, shadowboxing with imagined guards. Rabbit wrote a forged letter—weathered edges, official ink, the mark of a minor noble family long since fallen into obscurity. It bore no crest, only a name: Norril.

By dusk, the manor felt like something closer to a headquarters. A bad one. But a start.

That night, Márcio Keel arrived without knocking. He stood in the threshold like a figure out of a forgotten play, his high-collared coat rain-slicked and faintly steaming in the hearthlight. His satchel bulged with old documents and scraps of occult nonsense. His boots were far too fine

for someone who claimed no home, and his eyes held that same mixture of melancholy and mischief that had unnerved them the first time.

“Evening, gentlemen,” he said, voice warm but tired. “Are you ready to go make history?”

Jack gave a half-salute. “As long as history doesn’t end with me strung up.”

“We’ll only be strung up if you speak before thinking,” Rabbit replied, snapping shut his pocket watch. “Stick to the story.”

Márcio gestured for them to follow. “Then let’s walk.”

They moved like shadows through Doskvol’s heart, slipping between fog and alleyway. The city pulsed with its usual nocturnal rhythm—far-off screams, the whistle of constables, the hiss of gaslamps. As they neared the Governor’s District, everything grew quieter, thicker, as though the mist itself respected the power that ruled here.

The Governor’s House loomed into view—a monolith of cold stone and iron, lit by silent lanterns and watched by guards who looked as if they hadn’t blinked in years. The gates were tall, barbed, and too well-kept for the city they belonged to. Behind them rose the estate: gothic arches, columned towers, and windows like slit eyes in a pale face.

Rabbit handed the forged letter to Márcio, who folded it with ceremony and stepped forward. The guards crossed spears at his chest.

“My name is Márcio Keel,” he said, voice steady and aristocratic. “We are here on behalf of our family. Our kin, Jack Norril, is being held here under suspicion. We demand clarity. And access.”

The guards exchanged a look.

“Wait here,” one said, before vanishing through a side door.

The silence that followed was taut, every second a drumbeat. Harry shifted uncomfortably in his boots. Jack adjusted his coat and flashed a grin to no one in particular. Rabbit stared straight ahead, hands folded behind his back.

Whatever lay beyond those walls—whether it was a dungeon, an interrogation chamber, or a trap—they would meet it not as burglars or liars, but as something far more dangerous. Family.

The gate creaked open just enough to allow the imposing figure of a uniformed officer through. His posture was rigid, chin held high, his brass-buttoned coat gleaming under the gaslight. The sword at his hip wasn’t ceremonial—it was used, sharpened. He looked over the group with open distaste.

“You’ve got the wrong address,” he said before they could speak. “This is a government estate. Not a visitation center.”

Rabbit's Foot stepped forward calmly, his coat catching a faint breeze. “We were told Jack Norril is being held here. We’re his cousins.”

The officer blinked once, unimpressed. “Then your source is mistaken. No prisoners are held here. You’ll want Ironscar.”

Jack stepped forward with a grin too easy to be comforting. “Ironscar told us to come here.”

“That’s impossible,” the officer snapped, taking a step closer. “No one is sent here from Ironscar. This is the Governor’s House. We house offices, not inmates.”

“You also house secrets,” Rabbit murmured, more to himself than the officer.

The officer’s eyes narrowed. “What did you just say?”

Harry cleared his throat nervously. “Look, we’re not here to cause problems. We know there’s another holding area—beneath the manor. A special place. Not on paper.”

The officer’s jaw flexed. “You are mistaken. And dangerously close to trespassing.”

Márcio stepped forward then, slow and deliberate. Despite the frayed edges of his coat, he held himself like a man who expected to be listened to. “Officer,” he said, voice low and smooth. “We paid well for the information we have. To the right people. This isn’t speculation. We know Norril is down there. We just want to speak to him.”

“Paid?” the officer hissed, tone darkening. “Who did you bribe, exactly?”

Márcio raised a brow with measured condescension. “Let’s not play games. If this is above your clearance, then fetch someone who knows the cost of silence.”

“I know my orders,” the officer growled. “And I’m telling you: there’s no prisoner by that name, no cell beneath this house, and no damn reason you should be here.”

“Then I want to speak to Captain Ishtar,” Márcio snapped, louder this time. “If he’s as diligent as they say, he’ll want to know if someone's been taking coins to whisper secrets from inside his own walls.”

That silenced the officer.

His jaw clenched, eyes darting from one face to the next. Rabbit watched him closely, noting the flicker of recognition—Ishtar’s name had struck somewhere it wasn’t meant to.

After a tense pause, the officer spoke again. Slower now.

“Stay here. Don’t move.”

The gate slammed behind him with a final, echoing clang.

Jack whistled low. “So… who thinks we just jumped up the ladder?”

“I think we just set it on fire,” Rabbit muttered, adjusting his glasses.

Harry, pale, gripped the edge of his coat. “Is Captain Ishtar really in there?”

“If he is,” Márcio said, brushing invisible dust from his lapel, “then we’re already neck-deep.”

The iron gate groaned open again, slower this time. The officer stepped out once more—but the sneer had vanished from his face. His posture was more formal now, composed in the way a man becomes when someone of higher rank has pulled on his leash. Behind him stood two more guards, their rifles shouldered but hands tense.

“The Captain will see you,” he said stiffly. “This way.”

No apology. No admission. Just a command.

Rabbit's Foot gave a sidelong glance at Márcio, who offered the faintest nod, then followed.

The party moved in silence through the threshold of the Governor's House, into a high-ceilinged reception hall that smelled faintly of oil, incense, and wax. The marble floor echoed their footfalls like an accusation. Gaslamps flickered in polished brass sconces, casting long shadows up vaulted walls. A grand staircase loomed ahead, but they were steered instead down a side corridor, past portraits of Doskvol's old governors—none of whom looked particularly kind.

At last, the guards stopped before a dark wooden door. One opened it without a word and gestured inside.

A waiting room. Ornate, but suffocatingly still. Velvet chairs, a low table with untouched papers, a grandfather clock ticking in the corner like it resented them.

"You'll wait here," the officer said, then closed the door behind them with a solid *thunk*. A shadow lingered in the frosted window on the door—one of the guards, posted firmly in place.

They were inside. But not free.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Jack collapsed into one of the chairs, legs stretched, arms behind his head. "Well, that was civil," he muttered. "You think they serve tea in here, or are we past the polite part?"

"I don't like this," Harry said, shifting nervously. "Feels like we just walked into a cage."

"We did," Rabbit replied, brushing dust from his coat before lowering himself into a chair with care. "The question is, whose."

"I'm telling you," Jack said, his voice low but tinged with excitement, "if they've got a prison under here, it means they've got secrets. Secrets we can sell."

"That depends," Rabbit murmured, gaze drifting to the ticking clock, "on whether we walk out of here."

Márcio had remained standing, arms crossed, eyes on the window. "Ishtar won't ignore this meeting," he said quietly. "We've dropped too many names. He'll want to see who's at his gates rattling the locks."

Jack tilted his head. "You've met him before?"

"Not in person," Márcio replied. "But I know the kind of man who builds walls within walls. He'll want to know how much we know—and how much we're worth."

Harry looked up at the door nervously. "And if he thinks we're not worth anything?"

Rabbit's Foot didn't answer. He just reached into his coat and pulled out a small, palm-sized charm carved with runes—something quiet and lucky. He held it between his fingers like a gambler about to roll.

"They brought us in," he said finally. "Now we see if they regret it."

The clock ticked louder in the silence that followed.

The minutes dragged on like molasses. The ticking of the grandfather clock had grown unbearable, punctuating the silence with steady dread. Jack had started flipping cards on the table just to fill the quiet. Harry fiddled with his enchanted glasses, squinting through them at the walls as if they might reveal some hidden truth. Rabbit sat with his legs crossed, one hand on his lucky token, unmoving as a gargoyle. The tension felt like a held breath.

Márcio stood suddenly, pacing once, twice, then turned to face them with fire behind his eyes.

“Which of you,” he asked, voice low and abrupt, “is the bravest?”

The three exchanged glances. None replied.

Márcio gave a thin smile. “Hmm. I suspected as much.”

Before they could respond, he turned to Jack. “You’ll do. Come with me—and play along.”

Jack blinked. “Play along with what—?”

But Márcio was already moving, knocking twice on the door with the same casual rhythm someone might use to summon a servant. The frosted glass blurred the face of the guard who shifted outside. The door cracked open.

“Yes?” the guard grunted, clearly annoyed.

“I need to relieve myself,” Márcio said evenly. “And I’m sure you’d rather I didn’t do it in the governor’s fine upholstery.”

The guard hesitated. “You’ll have to be escorted.”

“Of course,” Márcio replied with a gracious nod. “One of your men will suffice.”

Then Jack stepped forward, putting on his most winsome smirk. “Might as well take me too. I’ve had three cups of nerves and a glass of poor decisions.”

The guard scowled, but turned and signaled another down the hall. “Escort them to the public lavatories. Don’t let them wander.”

Two guards now flanked them as they were led through a tight hallway lit by flickering lamps. The air here was colder, more clinical. Less opulent. Jack’s boots echoed on stone tiles.

He leaned closer to Márcio as they walked. “Care to tell me the plan, or are we improvising as we piss?”

Márcio didn’t look at him. “A little of both. Depends on what we see.”

Jack narrowed his eyes, suppressing a grin. “This better not be about actually needing the toilet.”

Márcio finally met his gaze, and in that brief moment, Jack caught a flicker of something in the older man’s eyes—resolve laced with reckless intent.

“Oh no,” Márcio murmured. “This is about finding the cracks in their walls. Even polite prisons have plumbing.”

They rounded a corner. Ahead, a simple metal door with a faded sign: *Public Lavatory – Staff Only Beyond This Point.*

Jack sighed. “We’re really doing this.”

“Of course we are,” Márcio said, pushing the door open.

And inside, behind flickering gaslight and cracked porcelain, Doskvol’s newest heist began in earnest.

The heavy lavatory door groaned shut behind them with the sound of damp wood and rusted hinges. Inside, the air was thick with mildew and the acrid scent of old ammonia. The cracked tiles underfoot were yellowed and uneven, the sinks chipped, and the mirror streaked with age. The single flickering gas sconce cast shadows that danced like ghosts along the mold-blackened ceiling.

Jack looked around, unsure of what exactly they were supposed to be doing in here. Then he noticed Márcio had stopped walking. The older man turned his head slowly and gave Jack a subtle glance—sharp and deliberate—two fingers pointed downward, then split outward in a small gesture. Almost imperceptible.

A signal.

Jack blinked. “What—?”

But Márcio was already moving.

With a sudden twist of his torso, Márcio slammed his elbow hard into the temple of the taller guard beside him. The impact echoed with a sickening *crack*. The man reeled, colliding with one of the ceramic sinks so hard it jarred loose from its rusted moorings. Water hissed from the ruptured pipe, spraying across the floor in a thin arc.

Jack’s instincts screamed. The second guard beside him reached for his baton, the leather strap snapping against his wrist as he drew it up.

Jack lunged forward, grabbing the man’s arm in both hands and twisting it sideways with a grunt. They spun together in a tangle of limbs. The baton fell with a clatter. The guard kneed Jack in the stomach, hard. Air rushed out of his lungs in a gasp, and he stumbled back, slamming into the door of a stall, which creaked open and bounced off the wall with a metallic clang.

“Damn it!” Jack wheezed.

He raised his club—nothing more than a heavy brass bar wrapped in leather—and swung hard. It caught the guard on the forearm as he reached again for the baton, and the man howled, backing up. Jack charged, wild-eyed and feral, and tackled him to the floor. They slid through the puddle of leaking water, fists punching, elbows driving. The guard was bigger, better trained, but Jack was faster—and desperate.

Across the lavatory, Márcio moved like a man who had done this a hundred times. He struck his opponent’s ribs twice in rapid succession—precise, practiced strikes to pressure points—and swept the man’s legs from under him. The guard crumpled into a heap between two urinals, unmoving.

Jack finally rolled atop his own opponent, pressing the club against the guard's throat. "Sleep," he growled. "Just go to sleep."

A last punch. Then silence.

The only sounds were the slow drip of water, the hiss of the broken pipe, and both men's labored breathing.

Márcio exhaled once, smooth and satisfied. He knelt beside his unconscious guard and began stripping off his uniform coat with the speed of habit, revealing a threadbare shirt underneath that clung to his frame like cobwebs.

"You're welcome," he muttered, without looking at Jack.

Jack leaned against the stall wall, chest heaving, sweat dripping down his forehead. "That... that wasn't a plan," he said. "That was suicide with extra steps."

Márcio glanced up at him, one eyebrow arching high. "Plans don't survive first contact with a locked door. Improvisation is the soul of survival."

"You could have told me."

"You came, didn't you?"

Jack scowled but said nothing. The truth was, his blood was thrumming, his hands tingling. This was what he did—he danced on knives. But Márcio had leapt without warning, and Jack wasn't sure he liked not knowing the tempo of the music. Jack adjusted the unconscious man's coat in his hands, staring at it like it might catch fire in his grip. The fabric was damp, the inner lining sticky with the warmth of someone else's sweat. His chest still heaved from the brawl, the adrenaline not quite flushed from his system. "This is mad," he muttered, glancing toward the door. Márcio didn't answer right away. He was already buttoning up his stolen uniform, the crisp Imperial insignia now sitting strangely well on his borrowed frame. He straightened the collar with practiced ease, as if he'd worn this disguise a dozen times before. Jack's stomach twisted. "What's the next step here, huh? We just stroll out like nothing happened? Hope nobody notices two guards missing and one of them walking with a street rat at his side?"

Márcio turned to him, expression unreadable. "We move fast. That's the step."

"I haven't even changed yet, for Void's sake," Jack snapped. "We could be hanged for this, Márcio. This isn't just some back-alley grift. We're deep in the Governor's House." A sound interrupted them—the sharp *clack-clack* of boots approaching just beyond the lavatory door. Jack froze. His breath caught in his throat. Too late. The door creaked open, and a uniformed guard stepped into the threshold, his eyes widening instantly at the sight before him—the wet floor, the groaning unconscious bodies, and one man already dressed in Imperial gear. Jack stood exposed, holding a half-buttoned coat in one hand like a child caught stealing candy. Márcio didn't hesitate. "Sorry," he muttered under his breath. "What?" Jack blinked—

—and Márcio's fist slammed into his cheekbone with the weight of a sledgehammer. Jack crumpled onto the slick tile floor, the coat slipping from his grip. He saw stars, then darkness, then the dirty ceiling swimming above him in a haze of ringing ears and broken trust. "Help!" Márcio barked at the new guard, putting on his best performance. "This one and his friend ambushed us—must've followed us in. The other's out cold in the stall!" The guard hesitated, blinking at the chaos.

“Don’t just stand there—help me restrain him before he wakes up!” The guard’s instincts took over. He rushed forward, grabbing Jack’s arms just as the thief groaned and tried to push himself upright. Jack tried to speak. “Márcio, what the hell—?” But a boot pressed against his back and shoved him down again. “Keep squirming and I’ll add resisting arrest,” the unfamiliar guard snarled. In moments, Jack’s wrists were bound behind him in cold, clinking manacles. Blood pulsed in his ears. He could still taste copper from the punch. Lying face-down on the filthy tiles, he looked sideways at Márcio, who crouched next to him now—one hand resting lightly on his shoulder, like a mentor soothing a disobedient pupil.

“Don’t worry,” Márcio whispered under his breath, low enough that the other guard couldn’t hear. “I’ll improvise something.” Jack gave him a look of pure venom. “You better. Or this is going to be the worst bloody con you ever pulled.” Márcio smiled—an infuriatingly calm, knowing smile—and rose to his feet.

“Let’s bring him to the holding chamber,” he told the other guard. “We’ll question him later.” And just like that, Jack "the Boy" was being hauled away—not as a conman, not as an intruder—but as a prisoner inside the very place he’d come to infiltrate. Alone. And utterly unsure whether he’d just been sacrificed… or saved.

The clock ticked loudly in the small, windowless room, its rhythm so regular it felt almost mocking. The air was stale, heavy with the scent of old tobacco and a faint tang of mildew that clung to the walls. Harry shifted in his seat for what felt like the hundredth time, tapping his fingers on his knee, his brows scrunched in quiet worry. “How long has it been?” he asked, his voice thin. Rabbit's Foot didn’t look up from his place near the far corner, where he stood with arms crossed, back pressed to the wall. “Too long,” he muttered. Harry frowned. “What if they’re in trouble?”

“They’re in trouble,” Rabbit said flatly. “We all are. This was a bad idea from the start.” Harry leaned forward, whispering now, as if the walls had ears. “We should go. We haven’t done anything *yet*. Maybe we can still walk out. Say it was all a mistake.” Rabbit’s eyes, sharp behind the glint of his glasses, cut across the room to Harry. “Walk out of the Governor’s House? Past guards? With nothing but apologies?” He shook his head slowly. “This place isn’t built for honest mistakes.”

Harry swallowed. “I just don’t like being separated. Márcio’s... weird. And Jack—Jack could mess this up in three different ways just by *breathing*.” Rabbit’s expression darkened slightly, though he kept his voice calm. “Jack is reckless, not stupid. He wouldn’t blow this unless—” A knock. The door creaked open, and a guard in a dark navy uniform stepped in, his face unreadable under the gaslight overhead. “The Captain will see you now,” he said simply. Harry and Rabbit exchanged a glance. No time to speak. Just move. They stood, quietly following the guard through a narrow corridor. The deeper they went into the building, the more the air seemed to change—colder, more sterile, like the stone itself had been trained to listen. Lamps flickered on brass sconces, casting long, warped shadows on the brick walls. After a final turn, they were brought to a solid metal door. The guard knocked once, opened it without waiting for a response, and motioned them inside. The interrogation room was dimly lit, bare of any comfort or décor. At its center was a long steel table, two chairs on one side... and one on the other. Jack sat in that lone chair, slouched slightly, his wrists cuffed to a metal ring bolted into the table. His right eye was swollen, blooming red and purple, a smear of dried blood marking the corner of his mouth. He looked up as they entered, his usual smirk nowhere to be found.

“Bloody took you long enough,” he rasped.

Harry stopped cold. “Jack—what happened?”

But before either of them could rush forward, a second guard stepped from the shadows of the room. He was tall, sturdy, —his Imperial uniform worn too naturally, too confidently. But his eyes… Rabbit froze. His gaze met the man’s, and something ticked behind them. Recognition. “Márcio?” he mouthed. Harry’s eyes widened, darting between the disguised man and Jack. “Wait. What… what’s going on?” But Márcio—now dressed head to toe as an Imperial enforcer—said nothing. He stood by Jack’s side like any loyal guard might, arms crossed, expression unreadable. Just another uniform in a room of suspicion. Harry opened his mouth to speak again, but Rabbit stepped on his foot, lightly but firmly. “Not now,” he whispered under his breath. Something unspoken passed between them: play along. And then, from a door at the far end, footsteps echoed. A new presence about to enter the room. Captain Morian Ishtar.

The door opened without announcement—no creak, no thunderous bang—just a smooth, ominous hush like silk sliding across steel. Captain Morian Ishtar stepped into the interrogation room. The very air seemed to adjust around him, quieting as though bracing for his presence. Behind him came two guards clad in ceremonial black, their rifles polished and boots clicking in perfect rhythm, but it was Morian who drew the eye. Always him. He was not tall by soldier standards, nor bulky with brute strength—but he didn’t need to be. There was something immaculate in the stillness of his posture, in the way his silver-white hair fell like a wild crown above his calm, unreadable eyes. His skin was smooth and pale like moonlight carved into flesh, and his presence carried the weight of old things—not age, but experience. Danger. A golden circlet adorned his brow, catching the cold lamplight, while the feathered earring hanging from his left ear shifted slightly as he moved, whispering of rituals and meanings not yet known. His black uniform bore the fine tailoring of imperial command, crisp and creaseless, buttoned with precision. The white collar beneath his jaw gleamed unnaturally clean, like no blood, sweat, or smoke had ever dared to touch it. He didn’t speak at first. He didn’t need to.

Márcio—the disguised guard—straightened instantly, almost reflexively. The real guard near the door snapped to attention. The room itself seemed to contract, focus sharpened into one man. Harry gulped audibly. Rabbit didn’t flinch, but even he shifted his weight, angling slightly as if preparing for a mental duel. Only Jack grinned, blood still drying beneath one eye. “Nice place. Real welcoming.” Morian finally blinked. Slowly.

“Jack Norril,” he said, as if testing the name on his tongue. “That’s who you’re here for.” A pause. Not a question. A chess move. Harry sat up straighter, eyes wide. “He’s our cousin,” he said quickly, unconvincingly. “We—we were told he was being held here. We just wanted to see him.” Rabbit's Foot offered no assistance, choosing silence over improvisation. His mind was calculating, rewinding every step since entering the building. Jack, still in cuffs, leaned back. “You don’t look like a prison warden.” Morian’s lips curved—ever so slightly. Not a smile. A ghost of one. “This is a government building,” he said, tone polished and low, like velvet wrapped around glass. “Not a prison. We process military logistics, trade permits, and high-level law enforcement matters. I assure you, no such person is listed on the official register.”

“But,” he added, and here his voice shifted into something gentler—more dangerous, “it is Doskvol. Sometimes… things fall through the cracks.” He turned, hands behind his back, approaching the trio with deliberate pace, circling like a teacher addressing misbehaving students. “So I ask again—who exactly are you? A boy magician, a man who won’t give his real name, and a fast-talking gutter thief walk into my house... uninvited. What am I meant to believe? That this is a coincidence?” Rabbit's Foot adjusted his glasses, voice quiet but even. “You’re meant to believe that we were paid to make a visit. That’s all.” Morian tilted his head, eyes narrowing. “Paid by whom?” The room thickened with silence.

Harry opened his mouth, but Jack barked, “A man, We don’t know his name. Dressed like a noble. Smelled like a sewer.”

“Fascinating,” Morian murmured. His gaze flicked—just for a fraction of a second—to the disguised man still standing at the wall. No reaction. None needed. He moved again, slower this time, toward Jack. “And you... You’re bleeding. Why?”

Jack smirked. “Fell down the stairs.” One of the guards behind Morian stepped forward at that—ready to speak, maybe correct the lie—but Morian raised one hand. The gesture was small. Absolute. “I’ll determine what’s true,” he said. Then he turned back to Rabbit and Harry. “You’ve come into one of the most protected places in the city, asking about a man who does not exist. You do not leave this room until I am convinced you are neither spies, terrorists, nor glorified fools being used as bait.” He stopped in front of the table and leaned forward slightly. Just slightly. “So let’s start again, shall we?” His tone remained maddeningly calm. “Tell me exactly why you're here, and what you *think* you know about Jack Norril.”

The silence that followed Morian’s question stretched long enough for the lamplight to flicker in discomfort. Somewhere down the corridor, a clock chimed the half-hour—soft and distant. Inside the room, time felt like it had stopped entirely. Rabbit's Foot folded his hands in his lap, steady as always. Harry’s eyes darted nervously toward Jack, who was still slouched in his chair, the growing bruise around his eye a blooming testimony of their failed plan. Jack’s lips curled in defiance, but for once, he held his tongue. Morian let the silence linger a second longer—just enough to unnerve, not enough to provoke. Then he straightened, pacing slowly along the wall again. “Tell me,” he said, voice low and razor-sharp, “does anyone else know you're here tonight?” Rabbit tilted his head slightly, playing for time. “We keep a low profile.”

“That’s not an answer,” Morian replied, pausing mid-step. His eyes snapped to Rabbit’s. “I didn't ask how flashy you were. I asked if anyone—anyone at all—knows you walked into the Governor’s House this evening.” Harry stammered, “We, uh… no. I don’t think so. We were supposed to still be in the suburbs. Nobody from the neighborhood even knew we’d left.” Morian gave a faint nod, as if confirming something only he could see.

“So no friends. No allies. No alibis,” he murmured. “That’s good to know.” He took another step closer. The air felt colder now, tighter. The two guards behind him remained statuesque, watching from the corners of their eyes. The one by Jack kept a firm hand on his holstered weapon. Still, it was Morian who dominated the space. He didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t need to. Then came the next question—so casually delivered it nearly passed unnoticed: “And the fourth?”

Rabbit didn’t flinch, but the others did. Morian smiled—tight, knowing. “You said you were four. I count three.” He raised a single pale finger. “One bloodied con artist.” Another finger. “One street-taught magician.” Third finger. “One man who calls himself after superstition.” He turned to Rabbit and let the weight of the moment hang between them. “So where is your fourth?”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “We were just supposed to meet someone. He’s not… really part of our crew.” Morian raised a brow. “So you don’t even know the man who asked you to break into my house?” He clicked his tongue. “Poor judgment. Or an obvious lie. Which is it?” Rabbit exhaled. Slowly. “He found us. We didn’t seek him out.”

“That’s still not a name,” Morian replied coldly. Jack leaned forward now, elbows on the table despite his cuffs. “Tall guy. Ragged beard. Dressed like he thinks he’s royalty but smells like rotgut. Had the look of someone who used to be important, before Doskvol spat him out.”

Morian listened. His smile never changed, but the shadow it cast grew darker. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” he said softly. He took another step forward, lowering his voice even

further. “And yet… somehow, you walked right through the front gates, escorted by guards who shouldn’t know your names, asking about a man who shouldn’t exist… because of him.” His gaze sharpened into something surgical. “You’re not the con men in this room. You’re the marks. And I want to know: what game is he playing? And what did he promise you?”

Rabbit spoke slowly, cautiously. “He offered us a coin. And a name. Jack Norril.” Morian considered that. “A name with no records, no sentence, no origin. But... conveniently whispered into your ears.” He turned to Harry. “You. Tell me truthfully. If I sent my men to check Ironscar right now, would they find your cousin?” Harry faltered. His mouth opened. Then shut. Then it opened again. “I—I don’t know,” he said finally, voice thin. “Maybe. Maybe not. I was just trying to help someone.” Morian moved closer to Harry now, too close, crouching so they were eye level.

“Then let me be clear, boy,” he said softly. “If your mystery man got you to walk through those gates thinking you were heroes on a rescue mission, then he’s either a fool using you as bait… or a mastermind using you as cover.” He rose. “And I do not tolerate cover stories in my city.”

No sooner had Captain Morian Ishtar spoken those words than the room subtly shifted. A distant *boom* pulsed through the floorboards—more sensation than sound. The walls quivered faintly, and dust trembled loose from a nearby gas sconce. The lights flickered once, then held. Everyone in the room froze. The guards snapped into posture, one already reaching for the communicator crystal on his belt. The sharp *pop* of distant shouting followed the vibration, muffled but urgent. Another explosion? Sirens began to echo somewhere outside. But Morian... simply stood still. He didn’t even flinch. Instead, he turned slowly, the faintest curl of a smile tugging at one corner of his marble-like face. “My, my,” he said, hands clasped neatly behind his back. “What a *remarkable* coincidence.”

He stepped past Jack, past Rabbit and Harry, stopping just beside the man wearing the guard uniform—Márcio Keel, still holding his rifle like a statue. “You,” Morian said, voice low but edged with frost, “will remain here. Watch them. If any of them so much as *blink* in the wrong direction... shoot to kill. No hesitation.” Márcio offered a curt nod. “Yes, sir.” Morian didn’t even look back as he motioned to the real guards. “With me.” They filed out silently, leaving a thick tension hanging in the air. The door shut behind them, followed by the unmistakable *clack* of locks sliding into place. Bolted. Barred. Soundproofed. A long silence followed, save for the crackle of a flickering gaslamp overhead. Then Rabbit's Foot broke it.

“What the hell is going on?” He hadn’t moved from his chair, but his hands were clenched tight in his lap now. His glasses caught the lamp’s glow, making his eyes unreadable. “That explosion. That was you, wasn’t it?” Márcio—the guard—lowered his rifle with a dramatic sigh, rolled his shoulders, and finally allowed a smirk to form beneath the regulation-issue mustache. “Everything,” he said lightly, “is going *exactly* according to plan.” Jack scoffed, shifting in his chair with an exaggerated rattle of chains. “Oh, *perfect*. So being interrogated by Doskvol’s deadliest bureaucrat and having my face rearranged was part of the plan?” he snapped. “What’s next, Márcio? We start a riot in the breakroom?” Márcio chuckled and moved to Jack’s side. “Wouldn’t be the worst idea,” he muttered, kneeling to unlock the cuffs with a small, stolen key. “And for the record, I did say ‘play along.’ The punch was for *your* cover.” Jack rubbed his wrists once free, grimacing. “You owe me a drink, or a new jaw.”

“Add it to the invoice,” Márcio said with a wink. Harry looked between the two, still catching up. “Wait... that explosion. *You* set that up?” Márcio dusted his borrowed uniform with care. “Not directly. But I might have arranged for a... delivery.” Rabbit narrowed his eyes. “Distraction team?”

“Think of them as... motivated volunteers,” Márcio said. “Now, while everyone’s busy looking at the front gates, we have about ten minutes to make this real quiet or very loud. Guess which one I’m aiming for.” Jack leaned back in his chair with a sarcastic grin. “Oh, I’ve got a guess. You’re planning to waltz us down into the bowels of this place and pull off a prison break in the most fortified government building in Doskvol.” Márcio’s grin widened. “Precisely.” Rabbit sighed and stood. “Let’s not waste the chaos.” Harry adjusted his sleeves, the subtle shimmer of heat already building at his fingertips. “Where’s the door?” Márcio turned toward the back of the room and ran a hand along the wooden paneling. With a soft click, a narrow cabinet popped open to reveal a maintenance hatch behind it—just large enough for one person to slip through. “Time to visit the underworld, boys,” he said. Jack cracked his knuckles. “Now *this* feels like a proper job.”

The hidden maintenance hatch opened with a quiet hiss, revealing a narrow crawlspace bathed in shadow. One by one, the four of them slipped inside, vanishing from the interrogation room like smoke slipping under a door. Behind them, the cabinet clicked shut again, returning to its place as if it had never been disturbed. The passage bent downward, each step taking them deeper beneath the Governor’s House. Cramped pipes lined the walls, leaking faint steam that curled around their boots. The air was close and smelled of rust, damp stone, and old secrets. Somewhere above, boots thundered and voices barked orders—but here, in the belly of the building, it was quiet save for the low hum of machinery and their own careful breaths. Márcio moved with uncanny certainty, navigating half-lit corridors like a man who’d memorized every brick. He turned corners with smooth precision, paused to listen, then motioned them forward again. They passed a hallway lined with polished doors and brass nameplates—offices belonging to Doskvol’s highest officials. One, in particular, caught their eye: *Captain Morian Ishtar*. The plate shone even in the dim light, immaculate and sharp-edged, like the man himself. Harry lingered for half a heartbeat, glancing through the door’s frosted glass. Inside was opulence in rigid order—paper-stacked desks, books locked behind brass grills, and a golden cabinet in the far corner that pulsed faintly with a warm, otherworldly glow. Not bright. Just enough to catch a glint in Harry’s glasses. He blinked once, and the light was gone. “Harry,” Rabbit whispered, tugging at his sleeve. The boy tore his eyes away and followed.

They moved in silence, weaving through hallways not meant for guests—areas where the tiled floors gave way to smooth concrete and unpainted steel. Guards passed at a distance, their voices echoing faintly, never noticing the four shadows flitting behind crates, stepping between doorframes, ducking under half-closed grates. At one point, they stopped beneath a wide stone stairwell as a pair of armed sentries clattered overhead. Jack held his breath, pressing his back to a wall that still radiated the day’s warmth. Márcio raised a finger, waited, then led them onward. Eventually, the tone of the building shifted. The decor fell away. Polished wood was replaced by raw brick. The carpet vanished. Lanterns grew fewer and farther between, and those that remained flickered with uneasy light. A low vibration throbbed beneath their feet now—something deep, steady, like the beat of a slumbering heart buried far below.

Márcio slowed. “This is it,” he said softly. They stood before a long, ominous corridor. The stone here was dark and worn smooth by time, the air colder than it had any right to be. There were no markings, no signs—just a narrow hallway that seemed to stretch far beyond the reach of their eyes. From somewhere deep within, a groaning creak echoed. Not metal. Not wood. Something older. Jack glanced sideways. “Feels like we’re walking into a grave.” Rabbit folded his arms. “Not far off.” Harry swallowed, his breath catching as he stared into the corridor. “Are we sure this is where they’d keep a man on death row?” Márcio looked down the hall, his expression unreadable. “They don’t call this place a prison,” he said. “But make no mistake—what’s buried under the Governor’s House is worse than any prison Ironscar could imagine.”

The corridor stretched ahead like the throat of some sleeping beast—silent, damp, and too narrow for comfort. The walls whispered with unseen drafts, and every step they took echoed back as if something farther down was listening. Rabbit's hand rested on the spine of his arcane ledger, thumb absently brushing its iron clasp. His brow was tight, eyes scanning the surroundings with quiet unease. "This doesn't feel right," he muttered, voice low and sharp.

Jack turned back with a half-smile, the flicker of lantern light catching the gleam of mischief in his eyes. "You mean aside from breaking into a secret prison beneath the Governor's House with a man we met two days ago?" Rabbit shot him a look. "I mean the weight in the air. The silence. Something's coiled around this place, like a trap that's already been sprung." Harry clutched his ring-hand a little tighter, trying to still the tremor in his fingers. "You think it's... magical?"

"I think it's worse than that," Rabbit replied, his voice thin. "It feels planned. Layered." Jack chuckled under his breath, adjusting the collar of his long coat. "You two think too much. Maybe it's just stone and shadows. Or maybe we're finally doing something worth whispering about." Harry hesitated before speaking. "You're not scared?" Jack raised an eyebrow. "Scared? Of course I'm scared. But reputation, kid—that's what matters in this city. You want to be taken seriously by the Unseen? The Gloam Sisters? Hell, even Ulric Stoneborn? Then we pull off something impossible." Rabbit's footfalls slowed. "Breaking a man out of a prison that doesn't officially exist—on no one's real orders, with no name, and no confirmation he's even here... That's more than impossible. That's suicide."

Jack's smile widened, but it was thin now. "Or legend."

Harry stayed quiet for a moment, staring down the long hallway ahead. "I keep thinking about what Márcio said. That this man—Jack Norril—he's being held on death row, but not in Ironscar. Why go through all this trouble to hide him here?" Rabbit didn't answer right away. "Because whoever he is… he's not meant to come back." A long silence passed between them. Their breaths fogged faintly in the still, cold air. Then Harry blinked. He looked left, then right.

"Wait," he said. "Where's Márcio?" The three of them stopped talking. The corridor ahead stretched on, the shadows thickening. But behind them— Empty. Jack's smile finally faltered. "You've got to be joking."

The corridor stretched on like a throat growing darker with every step. The stone turned damp. The gaslamps overhead flickered with unsteady pulses, casting long shadows that danced behind the three intruders like mocking silhouettes. Their boots echoed now with a sharper note—like they were being followed by their own doubts. But ahead of them, without a word, Márcio Keel was already moving. He didn't glance back, didn't call for them to keep up. He walked like a man on a route he'd rehearsed a hundred times in his head. His steps were purposeful, steady, the weight of secrecy clinging to his frame like a second coat. Occasionally, he'd pause to glance into one of the narrow cells lining the corridor, but there was no uncertainty in his posture. He wasn't searching. He was verifying. He already knew where he was going. Jack muttered under his breath. "Friendly of him not to mention the disappearing act." Rabbit gave no reply, but his eyes never left Márcio's silhouette—tall, still clad in the stolen uniform, the dim light catching the plum thread of his tattered cravat beneath the collar. He looked like a noble who'd lost everything and decided to take it back one corridor at a time.

They watched as he came to a halt. The cell door in front of him was like the others—thick iron bars, no handle, a single slit at eye level—but something about the air shifted the moment he stopped. The hallway, already cold, seemed to exhale. Márcio leaned in slightly. Not enough to be seen as a threat, but enough to show confidence. Maybe even reverence. Inside the cell, something moved. A shape hunched low on the bench, arms resting loose over his knees.

Prison clothes hung off him in folds, stained and fraying at the edges. The light didn't reach all the way in—but it caught his smile. That was the first thing to emerge from the dark. A grin, wide and feral, carved into a face that didn't blink, didn't twitch—just watched. Márcio's voice, when it came, was soft. Almost respectful. "Jack Norril." The figure didn't answer. He cocked his head slightly. His eyes—brilliant, precise—glinted from the shadow like glass cut too thin. Márcio let a breath slip between his teeth. "Today's your lucky day. Not the day you die, after all."

Still no words. Just that smile. It didn't grow or fade. It just… persisted. As if it had always been there. As if it belonged to the dark more than the man. Behind Márcio, Jack "the Boy" swallowed something dry in his throat. "That him?" he whispered. Rabbit nodded slowly, eyes narrowing. "That's him." Harry, standing a step behind the others, stared through the bars with something closer to awe than fear. "He looks like he already knows we're here." Inside the cell, the man who had been called Jack Norril tilted his head again. A slow, deliberate motion. Then—for just a moment—he closed his eyes. The grin remained. And the silence deepened.

Márcio slipped the ring of brass keys from his belt and held them up for just a second—long enough for them all to glint in the flickering light—before selecting one with practiced fingers. The iron lock clicked open with a low, resonant *clunk*, and the cell door creaked outward. Inside, Jack Norril didn't move. He simply watched, the smile still glued to his face like a painted mask. His eyes, however, sharpened. Márcio stepped in first. The two men regarded one another in heavy silence—one in stolen black-and-gold uniform, the other in grey inmate linen, bare-footed and feral-eyed. Between them passed something electric. A tension so subtle and strange that even Jack "the Boy" didn't dare crack a joke. Norril's voice was rasped and low, yet theatrical in its irony. "And what should I call you lot?"

Márcio's expression barely shifted. "Call us friends." Norril's grin split wider. He gave a short, sharp bark of laughter. "Heroes, then," he said, voice dripping with mirth. "How poetic." He stepped forward slowly, uncoiling from the bench like a man waking from a dream. Rabbit tensed, hand near his coat. Harry blinked as if trying to understand if this was really the man they were meant to save. Márcio didn't flinch. He was already tugging loose the high-collared tunic of the Imperial Police uniform, the ceremonial buttons catching in his hair as he pulled it over his head. Underneath, his shirt was sweat-stained, his frame thinner than they expected. He folded the uniform jacket and extended it toward Norril. Harry frowned. "Wait. What are you doing?" Márcio turned to him, calm. "Someone must stay. Someone must go."

"You mean—" Rabbit started, but stopped. The look in Márcio's eyes was enough. Final. Certain. Norril, chuckling quietly, was already shedding the coarse prison garb. He folded it neatly—surprisingly neatly—and passed it to Márcio like a man handing off a costume at the end of a play. "Are you sure about this?" Rabbit asked, voice lower now, more intimate. "Not the kind of place known for good hospitality." Márcio slipped on the inmate's shirt and met his gaze evenly. "Just get them out." Jack raised an eyebrow, watching Norril as he buttoned the collar of the guard uniform. "And the pay? If he's walking free… how do *we* get what was promised?"

Norril laughed again, the sound echoing strangely against the stone corridor. "Charming."

Jack scratched the back of his neck, muttering, "This is mad. We're just gonna *leave* you here?" Márcio nodded once. "You've done your part. Now let me do mine. Don't worry, payment will arrive." A long moment passed. Rabbit watched the man—this strange, tattered noble—and tried to decipher his intent. Harry looked uneasy, but there was a reluctant understanding behind his eyes. Jack glanced from Márcio to Norril, visibly unsure which one he trusted less.

"Time's ticking, friends," Norril said, now fully dressed as a guard, hair slicked back with prison sink water, his boots mismatched but convincing. "Let's not ruin the dramatic pacing."

With a final look back, the three turned to go. Norril followed behind, adopting the swagger of authority disturbingly well. His posture changed. His gait. Even the way he breathed seemed to shift. As they rounded the corridor, Rabbit looked back once. Márcio stood in the cell now, quiet and still, hands behind his back, head lowered like a man who'd already accepted the next part of the story. The door creaked shut behind them.

The halls of the Governor's House no longer felt like polished corridors—they felt like the throat of some beast, tightening, trembling. Gaslamps flickered with an unnatural rhythm as the four figures moved through the interior, careful as ghosts. Footsteps echoed faintly from far-off patrols, distorted by high ceilings and thick stone walls. The shadows were their allies now—so long as they moved quickly and kept silent. Jack Norril led the way, his borrowed uniform fitting him poorly but worn with the swagger of a man who could command attention in rags. The Imperial crest gleamed faintly on his shoulder, the same one Márcio Keel had worn only minutes before. Norril's pace was deliberate but relaxed, a contradiction to the tension humming in the air. There was something too fluid in the way he walked, like he wasn't sneaking but performing.

Behind him, Rabbit's Foot traced their route on a mental map, adjusting their course with subtle gestures. His coat brushed the walls as he moved—never hurried, always controlled. "We'll need to take the east stairwell," he murmured. "The one with the portrait of the masked governor. That puts us two halls from the exit." Jack "the Boy" kept glancing over his shoulder. "And if that stairwell's blocked?"

"Then we lie, cheat, or vanish," Rabbit replied dryly. Norril glanced back at them over his shoulder, his smile visible even in the gloom. "My kind of crew." Rabbit didn't smile. "Not yours," he said evenly. "We're just the ones fool enough to open your cage."

That earned a chuckle. "A cage is a matter of perspective, friend." The group paused at an intersection. Rabbit held a hand up, listened. Voices echoed from a side hall—two guards, passing. Norril pressed himself to the wall with them, still smiling, still calm. When the voices faded, he pushed off and resumed walking like it was all a stroll through a garden. But Rabbit wasn't done.

"You've said nothing real since we met you," he whispered sharply. "Who are you? Who were you before that cell?"

Norril raised an eyebrow. "Does it matter?"

Jack scowled. "Yeah, it bloody does. We risked everything back there."

"And gained everything," Norril replied smoothly, his voice a coiled serpent wrapped in silk. "Or do you not feel it? That tingle at the back of your neck? The thrill in your bones? That's the world shifting, boys. Because of you."

Harry, quiet until now, piped up. "You're dodging the question. Should we know your name?"

Norril turned toward the youngest of them, his gaze steady. In this dim light, his expression looked carved from marble and madness. "You should've," he said softly. "But now? You'll never forget it." The words landed heavy, like a prophecy. Harry took a slow step back. Norril grinned wider. "This is how legends start, kid. In dark halls, whispered names, and favors owed."

They continued moving, ducking into alcoves when boots thundered past, slipping through doors left ajar, weaving their way toward freedom. But the tension never left. Rabbit walked stiffly beside Norril now, as though waiting for him to snap like a trap left open too long. Jack rubbed the bruises on his wrists, still raw from the cuffs, eyes narrowed at the back of their new companion. And Harry? Harry didn't say another word—he just kept glancing at that grinning

man in the guard's uniform like he was waiting for the punchline of a joke no one wanted to hear. Only Norril remained at ease, humming quietly to himself. A lullaby, maybe. Or a funeral march. Outside was only minutes away. But something about the man they were walking beside made it feel like Doskvol had already changed behind them.

They rounded the final corner—and there it was. The heavy double doors to the Governor's House loomed ahead, lacquered black with iron filigree, framed by narrow stained-glass windows and flanked by the soft sputter of gaslight sconces. Just beyond those doors waited Doskvol's polluted fog, the sweet stink of coal smoke and seawater, and freedom. But then a voice cracked the silence, sharp and authoritative.

"Hold it there."

A lone guard stepped into their path from a side corridor. His boots struck the tile with weight, and his hand hovered near the short baton at his hip. He was broad-shouldered and thick-necked, with a mustache that bristled as he squinted at the quartet. "Identification?" he demanded. Rabbit's Foot exhaled slowly through his nose. Jack "the Boy" instinctively reached for his pocket before remembering he didn't carry anything that could help. Harry looked wide-eyed and guilty, every inch the teenage accomplice.

"Evenin'," Jack "the Boy" tried, stepping forward with a practiced smile. "We were just…"

"We're being escorted. Just civilians trying to get out." Rabbit said at the same time, his voice more composed, though tight.

The guard narrowed his eyes. "Escorting them where? Orders from whom?"

Harry floundered. "We were—uh—just here to ask about a cousin. A prisoner. Name's Norril."

The guard's posture changed. Not alarmed—but colder, more alert.

"Norril's no regular name," he said. "There's no public access to anyone in this wing. Who cleared your visit?"

Silence. It crawled up their throats like vines. Rabbit opened his mouth—nothing came. Jack looked at the floor. The guard took a step closer.

"Let me see your badge," he said to Norril. And then, finally, the disguised man spoke.

"You really want to make this your problem?" Norril said, voice calm, bored even, as if they were interrupting a routine errand.

The guard blinked. "What?" Norril stepped forward. Slow, deliberate. His uniform hung slightly loose, but the weight in his posture made up for it. Authority radiated from him like a second skin. "I was ordered to clean up a mistake," Norril continued, voice low and level. "Three civilians with questionable clearance wandered into an area far above their pay grade. Someone's gonna lose their job over it. Maybe two people, depending on how loudly they complain. Maybe a guard who decided he needed a badge more than a future." The man's brows furrowed. He hesitated. Norril kept walking—just a few more paces, close enough now that only a few feet remained between them.

"You're standing between me and getting them out quietly. What you should be doing," he said, his voice dropping almost to a whisper, "is thanking me for sparing you the paperwork. Unless you'd rather wake the Captain to explain how you tried to block an extraction already in motion."

“I—I wasn’t told—” the guard stammered.

“No,” Norril said, with a tight smile. “You weren’t.” He held the man’s gaze. It wasn’t intimidation through brute force. It was surgical—like he’d carved into the guard’s insecurities with a scalpel. The fear of punishment. The anxiety of stepping out of line. The chill that comes with realizing you’re not sure who outranks whom. The guard swallowed. Slowly, he stepped aside. Norril inclined his head. “That’s better.” He turned, motioning the others forward with a flick of his hand, never once looking back at the guard as they passed. Rabbit cast a brief glance over his shoulder. The guard stood frozen, unsure whether he’d been played or promoted. Jack let out a long breath the moment they stepped past the threshold. “Bloody hell.”

Harry whispered, “How did he…?” Rabbit didn’t answer. He was staring at the man beside them. Norril’s smile remained faint and amused, like the performance had meant nothing.

“See?” he said, tone light. “Told you. Legends.”

Doskvol’s night air hit them like a wave of soot and salt. The city was wide open again, but it didn’t feel like freedom—more like they’d slipped out of one cage and into a larger, colder one. The trio moved quickly through the maze of streets, gaslamps flickering overhead, the wet cobblestones slick beneath their boots. Each corner they turned, each shadow they passed, felt sharper now. More uncertain. Jack Norril walked a few paces ahead, his stolen uniform hanging loosely around his frame, but his posture unbothered—as if this entire night had been nothing more than a mildly interesting detour. Rabbit's Foot lagged slightly behind, watching Norril the way a man watches a lit fuse—curious, wary, too afraid to reach out. He could feel it: something in Norril’s aura didn’t sit right. Not the way he moved, not the way he spoke, and certainly not the way the city itself seemed to recoil from his steps. Even Doskvol, which had seen monsters of flesh and spirit, seemed unsure of what to make of this man. Harry stuck close to Rabbit, pulling his coat tighter around himself as if trying to keep something invisible out. The boy’s usual curiosity was dulled. He didn’t even ask where they were going next. His eyes stayed on Norril’s back the whole time—narrowed, unsure. They passed an alley where a stray cat hissed and darted into the darkness at the mere sound of Norril’s footsteps. Finally, in the lee of a broken warehouse, Norril stopped. The wind tugged at his borrowed collar. His hair—matted and unkempt, not quite wild, not quite tame—lifted faintly in the chill.

“Well,” he said, turning to face them. “This is where we part ways, I think.”

Jack furrowed his brow. “That’s it?”

Norril held up his hands in mock innocence. “Unless you want me to tuck you in?” None of them laughed. He chuckled to himself anyway. “Don’t worry,” he added, voice slipping into something like theatrical concern. “Do you boys have a way home? Should I walk you? Maybe fetch you a lantern? A bedtime story?” He tilted his head with exaggerated sweetness. “I worry. I do.”

Rabbit’s lips pressed into a thin line. Harry looked away, visibly uncomfortable. Jack took a step forward. “Not funny.”

Norril raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it?” A silence fell again. The city around them kept moving—far-off voices, the clatter of hooves, the soft screech of a skiff engine grinding somewhere near the canal. Life carried on as if the night hadn’t shifted on its axis.

Jack squared his shoulders. “We were told we would get paid to free you tonight.”

Norril gave him a slow blink. “And?”

Jack's voice lowered. "Until we are, maybe we ought to keep an eye on you." Rabbit stiffened at those words. Harry's fingers sparked faintly with residual magic. Norril's grin widened—without joy. Just teeth.

"You want to hold me?" he asked, with quiet incredulity. Jack hesitated. Norril leaned in slightly, his voice no louder than a whisper, yet somehow too loud. "You and what army?" The words hit like a chill running under the skin. Jack blinked, his smirk faltering. For a moment, none of them moved. Norril let the silence linger before turning on his heel. He walked into the alley beyond, the shadows swallowing him bit by bit. That smile lingered—almost floating behind, like an afterimage burned into their retinas. No one spoke as he disappeared around the corner. Only when he was gone did Rabbit finally let out the breath he'd been holding. "Well," he said softly. "Now we know what fear smells like." Harry hugged his coat tighter. "What have we done?" No one had an answer.

The next few days passed with an uneasy quiet hanging in the air—thick like the fog that never quite lifted from Doskvol's cracked cobblestones. Life, or something like it, had returned to the decaying house tucked in a forgotten corner of Crow's Ward. The boarded windows no longer wept dust when the wind blew through, and someone—probably Rabbit—had finally nailed the back door shut to keep the rats from organizing. Their little stronghold, once abandoned and half-consumed by mold, had started to transform. Not into a home—not yet—but into something functional. Usable. A den for the city's unwanted, perhaps. But it was theirs. Jack spent most of his time in the basement, stomping across its wide floor like a man overseeing a construction project only he could see. The old stone walls were still damp, the ceiling too low in some corners, and the air stank of mildew. But Jack had vision, and that was more valuable than a clean floor or breathable air. He'd taken to sketching rough plans with charcoal on a salvaged wooden board, half blueprints, half nonsense. Shelves. Curtains for makeshift privacy. A corner for tools, another for bandages. Syringes, scalpels, sutures—things most people didn't think about until they were bleeding.

"You know," Jack muttered one afternoon, adjusting a lantern hook with a bit of rusted chain, "I've been thinking…" Rabbit, perched on the stairs with his ever-present book of fate calculations, didn't look up. "You've been doing a lot of that lately."

"This basement," Jack said, tapping the stone floor with the heel of his boot. "We could turn it into something useful. Not just for us—for everyone. Well—everyone who can pay." Harry, sitting cross-legged on an old mattress upstairs, poked his head over the stair rail. "Like… a hideout?" Jack grinned. "No. A clinic."

Rabbit finally looked up, eyebrows raised. "A clinic?"

"A place where cutthroats, thieves, smugglers—anyone too banged up for the city hospital and too scared to risk the Espiritas Police—can get patched up without questions." Jack tossed a crowbar onto the ground for effect. "People will pay handsomely not to die." Harry made a face. "Do you even know how to patch someone up?"

"Don't need to," Jack replied. "I know a doctor. Used to work the docks. Got caught selling painkillers out the back and now he's stuck tending to drunks for copper coins. He owes me a favor. This could be his second chance." Rabbit let the idea hang in the air, then gave a slow nod. "Useful. And profitable." They sat in silence for a beat, contemplating the shift in their fortunes. Just a few days ago, they were nobodies crawling through the mud for scraps—and now they had money, a base, and… notoriety. Maybe not the kind they wanted, but the kind Doskvol always paid attention to. Then came the knock.

Three short raps on the front door—sharp, deliberate, like someone knocking a rhythm they hoped wouldn't be answered. Harry blinked, half-expecting to find no one at all when he crept through the hallway and cracked open the front door. The street outside was empty, thick with fog that twisted around the lamplight like smoke from a ghost's pipe. No footsteps. No shadows. But a small brown package rested neatly at the doorstep, as if placed with great care. Harry scooped it up and brought it inside, already calling out, "Something's here." Jack and Rabbit were at the table in an instant. Jack untied the coarse twine and flipped open the lid with the caution of someone who'd once opened a box filled with teeth. Inside: a velvet pouch, heavy with coin. The sound of it alone was enough to draw a low whistle from Rabbit.

"Well," Jack said, tilting the pouch slightly, "either we've been paid... or someone's bought our silence." Rabbit pulled out the second item—a folded clipping from the *Blades Chronicle*, the city's most persistent whisper mill, often more accurate than the official records. It smelled faintly of ink and wet pavement. And a note. No signature.

They laid the paper flat on the table. Three pairs of eyes scanned the headline. Silence followed. No one spoke. The lamplight flickered above them, casting long, crooked shadows on the peeling walls. The moment the note fluttered out of the envelope, the air in the old house thickened—as if even the shadows wanted no part in what was about to be revealed. Rabbit unfolded the newspaper clipping with slow, deliberate fingers, the paper brittle at the edges, still faintly damp from the night air. The note had been written in an elegant, tight hand, the ink flowing like a whisper laced with regret:

"*I'm sorry it had to be this way, but you will understand soon*."

No signature. Just that ominous line, hanging like a noose over whatever fragile sense of peace they'd reclaimed since returning from the heist. Jack peered over Rabbit's shoulder, his jaw tensing as the headline came into focus: **HORROR RETURNS TO DOSKVOL: Merrow Valesque ESCAPES Ironscar.** The article wasted no time with subtleties. The name itself was wrapped in blood and dread.

Merrow Valesque, the infamous anarchist and orchestrator of several mass civilian incidents, has reportedly escaped from Ironscar Keep late last night. Known for his calculated chaos and theatrical violence, Valesque was arrested two years ago after a city-wide crackdown spearheaded by the Espiritas Police and the Imperial Police. Officials described him as unstable, manipulative, and capable of inflicting 'symbolic terror' that struck not just the flesh, but the very identity of Doskvol's people. He was believed to be in solitary confinement under death row supervision at Ironscar's highest-security wing… until now.

Harry froze at the image printed beneath the text. The face in the grainy photograph was unmistakable—sharp cheekbones, the too-wide smile, those dancing eyes that glinted like they were watching a joke play out three steps ahead. It was the man they'd helped walk out of the Governor's House disguised as a guard.

It was "Jack Norril."

And it had all been a lie.

"I *knew* something was off about him," Harry whispered, the breath catching in his throat. "The way he smiled… he looked like he was already thinking about burning something." Jack leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed tightly, lips drawn into a tight line. "So his name wasn't Norril. Big surprise." He scoffed bitterly. "Of course it had to be *Merrow Valesque.* Why not the most dangerous bastard this city's ever seen?" Rabbit, still gripping the edge of the paper, didn't speak at first. His brow furrowed deeper, lenses catching the candlelight like twin moons. "Read that again," he said. "They say he escaped from *Ironscar.* But we pulled him out of the

Governor's House." There was a pause as the realization settled like dust in their lungs. Harry looked up. "They're hiding the truth?"

"No," Rabbit murmured. "They're *rewriting* it. They can't let people know he was kept somewhere secret. Somewhere *extra-legal.* They don't want Doskvol asking why a man sentenced to die wasn't in Ironscar." Jack paced a few steps, dragging a hand through his mane of hair. "And now it makes sense. Why Márcio was so jittery. Why there was no name. Why it had to be us. That man wasn't meant to come back." Harry folded his arms, staring down at the newspaper as if willing it to change. "He was never supposed to walk out of that cell. Ever." Jack glanced over at the gold coins on the table—their "payment," now tainted. "Well… we walked him out. Smiled while doing it." Harry shook his head. "He killed people. Families. Blew up a streetcar. Poisoned a reservoir in Ashvale. And we just… *helped* him." Rabbit exhaled slowly, the paper crinkling as his grip tightened. "We didn't help him, Harry. We *unleashed* him." A long silence followed.

Outside, the wind hissed through the cracks in the old brickwork, carrying the distant sound of a siren. Inside, the house felt smaller than ever, as if the walls were closing in, thick with the weight of their mistake. "I mean…" Jack tried to speak, his voice unusually unsure. "We didn't *know*. We were just—"

"Desperate?" Rabbit cut in, not unkindly. "Greedy? Stupid?" Jack didn't reply. Harry looked between them. "What do we do now?" Rabbit finally set the newspaper down with slow reverence, like laying a body to rest. "Now?" His eyes flicked to the window, to the flickering shadows of Doskvol beyond. "Now we pray he forgets about us."

Jack chuckled darkly. "Yeah, well... didn't you hear what he said? That we'd never forget him?"

He walked to the boarded window and pulled one slat aside. Fog drifted through the alley beyond like fingers. Somewhere in that mist, Merrow Valesque was out there—free, smiling, watching. "And I don't think he's planning to forget us either."

Chapter 2: A Symphony of Schemes

The Shadows' Den was quieter than usual tonight.

Not empty—this place never truly was—but quieter in the way a knife might lie still on a table, gleaming under candlelight, waiting to be picked up. It was the kind of quiet that made your ears strain, made your thoughts louder. The gaslights were turned low. Shadows curled thick in the corners. Velvet curtains muffled sound and sight alike. And the hum of hushed voices, somewhere deeper in the den, spoke in conspiratorial tones—laughter without warmth, secrets without faces. Jack sat at the long mahogany bar, a half-finished drink resting just beneath his chin. The glass caught what little light there was, the amber liquid inside shimmering like stolen treasure. He hadn't touched it in a while. Just let it sit there. Watching it. Thinking. Always thinking.

They were nobodies.

That word had been chewing at the back of his mind for days now, gnawing like a rat in the walls. The break from the Governor's estate should've been the talk of the underworld. Any real crew that pulled something like that—smuggling a death row inmate out from under the Governor's nose—would have made headlines in back rooms and whispers in alleys. They'd be getting drinks bought for them in low-end bars, eyes tracking them as they walked through night markets. They'd be *feared*. But nothing. No letters. No offers. No rumors. Just another foggy week in Doskvol. Because no one knew their names. *We don't even have a name.* The words had become a kind of prayer. A curse. A truth. The Cyphers had a name. The Gloam Sisters, the Ember Circle, the Stoneborn, the Skarrenfolk—they all had names, and more than that, they had meaning. Their names weren't just syllables. They were *currency*. When someone said "the Gloam Sisters," people stepped aside. They gave up turf, shut their mouths, handed over coin without needing a blade at their ribs. Power. Respect. That was what it meant to be real.

Jack? Rabbit? Harry? Nobody even knew they existed.

He let out a breath and tapped the rim of his glass, not drinking, just waiting. Across the bar, Ezra Nightshade was moving like a storm cloud wrapped in muscle and composure. Polishing glasses, checking his ledger, whispering to a runner that slipped out the back curtain. Ezra was always calm. Always sharp. A man with eyes like drawn steel and hands that could snap a bottle or a jaw with equal grace. Jack had been waiting for his turn, watching Ezra's orbit move around the room. Waiting to ask again. And now, finally, Ezra was coming his way. Jack sat up straighter as the man approached. He didn't smile. Didn't offer charm. Just leaned forward slightly and kept his voice low.

"You hear anything?" Jack asked. "Any jobs floating around? Smash and grabs, fences looking to move, burglary, maybe a night watch that needs watching?"

Ezra didn't break stride. He stopped just long enough to glance at Jack with a practiced calm, like he was weighing him without needing a scale. Then he spoke, slow and neutral. "We don't deal out work to just anyone."

Jack's brow creased. "Come on, Ezra. You know me. I've been here before."

Ezra leaned on the bar slightly, polishing the inside of a glass with a rag. "I know who you are. Doesn't mean you've made yourself *someone*, man."

Jack blinked. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ezra's expression didn't change. His voice stayed level. "Work goes to people with weight behind their name. Crews who can promise a clean job and bring no heat. You're new. You're untested. And you're still drinking under someone else's flag." Jack opened his mouth, but Ezra cut him off before he could get a word in. "No offense," Ezra added, casually. "But come back when you're someone." He tapped the bar once with a coin, a small gesture that meant the drink was on the house, and moved away, already talking to another patron. Jack sat there, shoulders stiff, jaw clenched. The insult burned deeper than the whiskey ever could. He stared down at the drink again, as if it had suddenly become poison. Not because Ezra had said it maliciously—but because he was right. And that was worse.

Come back when you're someone.

Jack picked up the drink and took a slow, deliberate sip. The liquor rolled down his throat like fire, but it didn't burn away the shame. Didn't wash down the silence that had followed their first big job. No glory. No recognition. No respect. Just a sack of coin, a cryptic note, and the nagging suspicion they had made a deal with the devil. He glanced around the bar again. A few familiar faces. A few too familiar. But none looking his way. None offering nods of recognition. It was like he wasn't even there. We're not nobodies, he told himself. We're just... not remembered yet.

Except someone was looking.

Jack's eyes caught a figure at the far end of the bar—a man sitting half in shadow, hunched over a drink he wasn't drinking. He hadn't moved since Jack walked in. Hadn't blinked, it seemed. Just sat there, elbows on the bar, watching Jack with the kind of focus you usually reserved for a ticking bomb or a rival card shark. Jack met his stare, expecting the stranger to look away like most folks did when they got caught. But this man didn't. His gaze was level. Steady. Measuring. He was tall, lean without being thin. Industrial, almost. Sleeves rolled up, arms marked with the faint lines of burns and callouses—working hands. His shirt and apron were the kind you wore in a forge or a foundry, patched with age and acid. A pair of brass goggles perched on his brow, lenses dark and smudged with what Jack instinctively knew wasn't dirt—it was residue. The kind that came from electricity. Or ghosts. And still, he didn't stop looking.

"The hell are you staring at?" Jack muttered loud enough for it to carry. "Mind your own damn drink." The man didn't respond. Didn't smirk or scoff. Just gave a single, slow blink. Then lifted his glass as if in a silent toast. Jack turned back to his own drink, jaw tense, and muttered under his breath. "We're not nobodies, huh? I'll show you who's nobody." He reached for the glass—then froze as a shadow fell across the counter beside him. The man was standing there now, quiet as fog. Jack hadn't even seen him move. He held a drink in one hand and a slim black card in the other—inked with gold trim, no name, no crest. Just a single word pressed into the surface in silver foil:

"XAVIER.**"**

"You're Jack "the Boy"," the man said. Not a question. Just a statement, flat and factual. Jack tensed. "Yeah. Who's asking?" The man didn't sit. He didn't need to. His voice was low and even, but carried weight like iron dragged across slate. "Name's Xavier. I think I know you, and your crew." Jack raised an eyebrow. "Then I guess we haven't been as invisible as I thought."

Xavier tilted his head, expression unreadable. "Not invisible. Just... unclaimed." There was a pause. Jack stared at the card, then back at the man. "What do you want?"

"A conversation," Xavier said. "In a quieter place. Soon."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "What kind of conversation?"

“One about opportunity. Timing. Purpose.” That last word felt deliberate. Jack tried not to let his interest show. “You offering work?”

“I’m offering direction,” Xavier said. “But work, yes. The kind that gets remembered.” Jack’s eyes flicked down to the card again, then back up. “We don’t have a crew name yet.” Xavier didn’t flinch. “That’ll come. First comes definition.”

“What does that even mean?” The man allowed the faintest curl of a smile. “It means knowing who you are before you tell the world what to call you.” He set the card on the counter and turned to leave, pausing just long enough to say over his shoulder, “Don’t wait too long. Doskvol moves faster than it forgives.” And then he was gone, swallowed by the curtains at the back of the bar. No sound. No goodbye. Jack stared down at the card, its metallic ink catching the light like a promise—or a warning. He took a sip of his drink, finally, and let it burn.

The streets of Doskvol hissed with fog and lamplight, the cobbled alleys slick from the morning drizzle that never quite dried. Gaslamps flickered like nervous thoughts overhead as Jack led the group through a narrow back lane near Ashmere Hall, his coat collar turned up against the chill. Behind him, Rabbit and Harry kept pace, though neither looked particularly thrilled about where they were going. “You sure about this?” Harry asked for what had to be the third time since they left the hideout. “I mean, secret tech cult? Weird skull symbol? Guys who push science into places it ain’t meant to go? This really who we want to work with?”

Jack didn’t turn around. “They’re called the Cyphers. And yeah, I’m sure.”

“That’s not an answer,” Harry grumbled. “You just like the sound of their name.”

“It is a good name,” Rabbit admitted, stepping around a puddle. “Slick branding, at the very least.”

Jack finally slowed, glancing over his shoulder with a grin. “It’s more than a name. The Cyphers don’t just play with gizmos—they’re builders. Innovators. Engineers of fortune. Lannic Morrow, their leader, he's the real deal. Burns across his face, half a hand gone—all in a battle with the Ember Circle. That’s not just mad science, that’s grit.”

Rabbit arched an eyebrow. “And you met this Lannic where exactly?”

“At the Shadows' Den,” Jack replied. “Or, well… one of his agents. Xavier. Real intense type. Looked like he could take apart a turret blindfolded and reassemble it into a tea kettle that shoots knives.”

Harry blinked. “That's… descriptive.”

Jack shrugged. “Look, Xavier said the Cyphers were watching us. Watching *me*. Said we’re ‘unclaimed.’ That means opportunity.”

“Or it means someone wants to turn us into parts,” Harry muttered.

They turned a corner into a quieter street, flanked by dense warehouses and tall iron fences. A set of double doors ahead bore the sign: *Lannic’s Tech Emporium*. It stood out like a polished tooth in a row of cracked ones—gleaming, precise, its windows full of glittering contraptions spinning and clicking on their own. Jack stopped before the door and gestured at the storefront.

“Looks like a shop, right? But underneath... that’s where they do the real work. They’ve got entire corridors hidden down there. Chambers, vaults, labs. I’ve heard they buy blueprints, design weapons for mercs, even rewire ghosts for espionage.” Rabbit looked up at the glowing sign with a curious squint. “So, if I’m hearing this right... this is a crew that *builds* its secrets instead of stealing them?”

Jack nodded. “Exactly. And they want to *hire* us. Us.” Harry crossed his arms. “You don’t think that’s strange? A crew of inventors bringing in a bunch of no-name burglars?” Jack turned to face them, voice low and urgent. “That’s the point, Harry. We’re not no-names for long. We walk out of here with a job done for the Cyphers? People talk. Doors open. Real crews start seeing us as equals. We get a name that means something.”

“You mean we *get* a name?” Rabbit asked, grinning slightly. “Because right now we don’t even have one.” Jack sighed. “Yes, Rabbit. I *know* we don’t have a name yet. Trust me, I’ve noticed.”

“Just saying,” Rabbit said, his tone too dry to be sincere. “Hard to be legendary if nobody can remember what to call you.” Jack pointed a finger. “We get this job, that changes. We start being the crew who pulled a job for Lannic Morrow himself. That’s *cred*.”

Harry shifted uneasily. “And what if the job’s not burglary? What if it’s something worse? Some experiment, some... invention that goes wrong? These people play with things they can’t always control.” Jack’s grin faded, but not his resolve. “Then we do what we always do, Harry. We *adapt*. That’s what thieves do.” The three stood before the door for a moment, shadows shifting behind the glass as gears clicked within. The street around them was quiet, unusually so. A strange stillness hummed under their boots. Jack stepped forward and pushed open the door. The bell above the frame chimed softly, and the scent of oiled brass and hot copper met them like a welcome—and a warning.

The bell above the door jingled with an oddly musical chime, followed by the gentle hiss of pressure valves realigning. Jack stepped inside first, his coat brushing aside a curtain of hanging wires threaded with tiny, blinking bulbs. The scent of warm brass, old ink, and something faintly chemical greeted him like an old ghost. Behind him, Harry ducked his head and followed, muttering something about smoke in the air. Rabbit entered last, his footfalls precise, his lenses fogging slightly before adjusting to the shop’s moody interior.

Lannic’s Tech Emporium was less a store and more a maze carved into the belly of some eccentric god of invention. The front room felt alive—its walls stitched with pipes, copper tubing, pressure gauges, and rotating brass fans with rusting spokes. Dozens of clockwork mechanisms lined every shelf and glass case. One wall buzzed gently with a kinetic map of Doskvol’s rail lines, its silver threads pulsing in time with unseen energy. In another corner, a birdcage hung from the ceiling—but inside fluttered not a bird, but a tiny flying drone that occasionally chirped and spun on its axis, like it was listening to something none of them could hear. Above it all, the soft whirring and ticking of machines blended into the low murmur of music from a wax cylinder player behind the counter—a slow, mechanical jazz tune that kept perfect time with the rhythmic hiss of pressurized valves. It was impossible to tell where ornament ended and function began.

A woman stood behind the main counter, polishing what looked like a miniature lightning tower the size of a loaf of bread. She had the poised hands of a craftsman and the demeanor of someone used to strange customers asking stranger things. Her outfit was utilitarian—a smart, high-collared vest over a dark blouse, rolled-up sleeves, and leather gloves pinned at her belt. Coils of copper wire were wrapped around both her wrists like bangles. Her dark hair was tied back into a tight, practical knot. She looked up with a courteous, professional smile as the trio approached. “Afternoon, gentlemen. Welcome to Lannic’s. Anything in particular you’re looking

for? Tinker's gear? Smart ink? We just got a few spirit-threaded amulets in—very popular with the Circle types." Jack offered her his usual crooked grin, but there was calculation behind his eyes. "We're not here for shopping. We're here to talk to your boss. Lannic." There was a beat. The woman blinked. "I'm sorry," she said slowly. "Who?"

"Lannic," Jack repeated. "Tall guy. Burned face. Clockwork hand. Runs this place." She tilted her head slightly, like a dog hearing a strange noise. "I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name." Jack's grin faltered. "Funny. Because the shop's named after him." That got a faint chuckle from her. "Oh. That." She set the lightning tower gently on the counter and leaned slightly forward. "The name's a holdover from the previous owners. It's a legacy brand, really. 'Lannic's Tech Emporium' already had a reputation when the shop changed hands. It's easier to keep the name than to rebrand the signage, the city permits, the import licenses…" She shrugged. "Honestly, I get that question at least once a week." Harry leaned in, puzzled. "So wait, the guy it's named after—he's not here at all? Then who owned it before?"

"Arthur Xavier," she replied, eyes flicking between them now with more caution. "He was the previous owner. Left a couple years ago after some… financial turbulence. Left a few broken machines and unpaid bills behind. Last I heard, he moved across town. The Docks, maybe Whitehollow. He hasn't been around here in a long time." Rabbit's brow furrowed. "Arthur Xavier?" The name landed heavily between them. "Yeah," she replied with a shrug, already reaching for a rag to wipe down a row of glowing gyroscopic prisms. "Tinkerer type. Bit intense, but talented. I was brought in after the place changed hands to clean up the mess." Jack didn't answer. Instead, he slid his hand into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a sleek black card. He flipped it between his fingers, letting the shop light catch on the cyber-skull embossed in silver and crimson. The card gleamed like a secret whispered too loudly. He held it up so she could see. Her reaction was immediate.

The woman stiffened. Her eyes darted to the card, then back to Jack's face, reading him again—but this time with a very different lens. The casual friendliness drained from her features, replaced by something sharper. More alert. She stepped around the counter with brisk purpose, her boots clicking sharply against the floor. "Oh," she said, voice lower now. "You mean Mister Lannic." Jack tucked the card back into his coat without another word. Her tone changed completely. "Of course. Right this way." She led them past humming glass tubes and shelves packed with mechanical parts toward the back of the store. As she passed a display cabinet of oscillating fuses, she reached out and pressed her thumb against what appeared to be a decorative bronze gear affixed to the wall. There was a soft *click*, followed by a low grinding sound. The entire back wall—made to look like it was lined with shelves of instruction manuals and boxed gears—slid aside on hidden tracks, revealing a narrow steel hallway lit by low, flickering sconces. The air beyond was cooler, drier, and smelled faintly of ozone and oil.

"This way, please," she said, her voice clipped and formal now. Harry frowned and muttered under his breath, "I don't like this." Rabbit adjusted the strap of his satchel, eyes scanning the hallway. "I do." Jack just smirked. He glanced back at the gleaming, cluttered shop one last time before stepping through the secret doorway. It closed behind them with the soft whisper of moving gears. This was it. Whatever secrets Doskvol was hiding in its iron veins… they were one step closer now. The woman didn't say another word after pointing to the hallway. Her earlier friendliness had vanished like mist under sunlight, replaced with something clipped and professional. She returned to the counter, her footsteps soft against the floorboards, the distant jangle of the shop's bell following her departure. Jack stood in the narrow corridor, staring at the lone door at the end. It was a plain thing—wooden, old, with iron hinges—but in Doskvol, he'd learned plain doors often led to complicated places. Behind him, Rabbit shifted. "You sure this is legit?"

“Nope,” Jack muttered, brushing dust from his lapel, “but we didn’t come this far to knock politely and leave.” Harry huffed but didn’t argue. So Jack took the lead, boots thudding against the boards as he strode toward the door like he belonged there. When he turned the handle, it creaked slightly—and swung inward. What lay beyond wasn’t what he expected. The corridor opened into a broad, circular room. The ceiling arched high overhead, lined with brass piping and rotating fans. An ornate electroplasmic chandelier spun lazily above, casting pale light over a heavy oak table that dominated the center of the room. Its surface was cluttered with blueprints, half-assembled devices, and a few low stacks of coin. The smell of ink and solder filled the air. Three men were already seated. One of them, Jack recognized instantly. Lannic Morrow. Tall, broad-shouldered, wrapped in a crisp vest and long coat tailored to perfection, even if the man wearing it was far from untouched. The right side of his face looked as though it had once been melted—scarred and burned, with ridges of glossy, pale skin that stretched from temple to jaw. The eye on that side was a faded gray, almost milky, but it never seemed to stop moving. Watching. Calculating. One of his fingers was gone, replaced by a gleaming brass mechanism that flexed as he turned a pen in his hand. Next to him sat Arthur Xavier—the man from the bar. Same worn goggles now resting on his forehead, same smudged coat and reinforced apron. The expression hadn’t changed either: unreadable, calm, confident. He glanced at Jack only once, a slight raise of his brow the only sign he even recognized him. The third figure was new. Dressed in a pitch-black coat with reinforced shoulders, gloves fitted tight over steady hands, a half-burned cigarette tucked behind his ear. His stare was sharp as frost and twice as cold. Even seated, he exuded a kind of coiled quiet—someone who didn’t need to announce danger. He just carried it like a second skin. A black-feathered crow perched behind him on a rail, preening.

Lannic set his pen down, rising slowly to his feet. “Welcome to my domain,” he said, voice smooth as oiled gears, the faintest rasp behind his words. “You must be the men I’ve heard so much about.” Jack straightened slightly, clearing his throat. “Jack. This is Rabbit. And Harry.” Lannic nodded, folding his hands behind his back as he paced to the front of the table. “Arthur tells me you’re resourceful. Daring. Reckless, maybe, but sometimes that’s a virtue in this line of work.” Harry looked like he wasn’t sure whether that was a compliment. Rabbit stayed quiet, eyes already sweeping over the strange gadgets lining the far wall. Jack? Jack stood taller. “We do what we need to,” he said carefully. “But we get results.” Lannic’s half-burned face twisted into something resembling amusement. “That’s what we’re all after, isn’t it?” He gestured to the table. “Sit.” They did. Jack noted how the chair creaked under Harry’s weight. How Rabbit sat forward, elbows on knees, already focused. Jack leaned back slightly—at ease, but alert. Playing the part he wanted to be. “I don’t waste time with couriers or ghost runners,” Lannic began, pacing behind his chair. “If I speak to you directly, it’s because I believe you have potential. I have operations across Doskvol. My faction, the Cyphers, deals in… innovation. We craft what others can’t. We see possibilities others won’t. But invention is only half the battle.” He paused, hand trailing over a blueprint. “The other half is acquisition. Strategy. Vision. I believe you might have all three. But belief isn’t enough.” Lannic leaned on the table, eyes landing squarely on Jack. “So tell me, Jack. Why are you here?”

The question hit harder than Jack expected. Not because he didn’t know the answer—he did. But because no one had ever asked it like *that*. Like it mattered. He hesitated for only a second. “Because we’re tired of being nobodies.” Arthur gave the faintest of smiles. Lannic’s burned eyebrow lifted. “We want in,” Jack continued. “Into something bigger. Into the real game. We’ve done work. Quiet jobs. Loud ones. But it doesn’t mean a thing until someone like you says it does. That bartender the other night said it plain—we’re not ‘someone’ yet. I want to change that.” Silas Thorn exhaled smoke from his unlit cigarette, finally speaking. His voice was low and even, with a hint of weariness. “A lot of crews want in. Not many survive the invitation.” Jack didn’t flinch. “We’ll survive.” Lannic gave a long, appraising look. Then he tapped a small stack of papers with his mechanical finger. “Good. Because I have something for you.” He sat back down, hands steepled in thought. “The Invention Fair is coming. A celebration of progress. A

gathering of minds. It's also one of the most heavily secured events in Doskvol—and the perfect place to steal something irreplaceable." He slid two sheets across the table. One showed a schematic of a strange vehicle: no reins, no horses, just wheels and steam and something like magic. The other was a list of ingredients, alchemical names Jack couldn't begin to read.

"We want both," Lannic said softly. "And we want you to get them." Jack reached for the papers. And as his fingers brushed the blueprints, he felt something strange spark in his chest. This was it. The start of something real. The beginning of a name worth remembering. Lannic steepled his fingers as he watched Jack lean over the blueprints. The electroplasmic chandelier above buzzed faintly, casting long shadows across the table. Jack's eyes flicked over the technical drawings—complex, labeled in notations he couldn't fully parse. Still, the shape of it was clear: a boxy, wheeled machine, powered not by reins or hooves, but by pressure and fire. Lannic spoke with the careful precision of someone unveiling a masterpiece.

"There's an event taking place in three nights," he said. "A showcase for innovation and civic pride. The Doskvol Invention Fair, hosted in the upper halls of Ashmere Hall. Engineers, alchemists, noble patrons, and industrial investors—all gathered in one place to marvel at the future." He tapped the schematic. "One of the future's faces will be this: the automobile. A self-propelled carriage—steam-powered, combustion-engine driven. No horses. No rails. Just pure mechanical movement. They claim it will change the very bones of the city. Road traffic without horses. A new age of independence. Control." Harry blinked. "Like… a metal carriage?"

"With no reins," Lannic said, his voice cool. "No stable hands. No exhaustion. Just fuel, ignition, and destination." Jack narrowed his eyes. "Looks fragile."

"Not for long," Arthur murmured. "Once it's field-tested and stolen six times over, everyone will want one. Including us." Lannic nodded. "Which is why we want the design now. Before it disappears into the vault of the Dreadwhalers or becomes a crown-sponsored prototype." He gestured to the second blueprint—less mechanical, more chemical. Vials, compounds, annotated results. A glowing amber liquid sat at the center of the drawing. "The other target," Lannic said, "is an elixir—a so-called 'miracle tonic' designed to triple the endurance and output of work animals. Horses. Dogs. Beasts of burden. It strengthens muscle response, numbs fatigue, sharpens obedience." Rabbit squinted at the formula. "Looks like half alchemy, half cruelty."

"Isn't that the foundation of most industry?" Lannic replied dryly. "What matters is what it can do. If the claims are true—and I believe they are—this tonic will be in high demand among the rail yards, the docks, the mines. The underworld too." Jack leaned forward. "So… you want both. The blueprints for the automobile. And the elixir."

"Precisely," Lannic said. "The automobile's design is a groundbreaking advancement, and the elixir's formula could have significant implications for the labor market. I need you to acquire both and deliver them discreetly." Rabbit tapped a finger against the table. "Why not just buy them? Why go through the trouble of stealing?" Lannic's smile was tight, thoughtful. "The Cyphers have our ways of acquiring valuable technology and knowledge. The fair is an optimal opportunity to obtain these innovations without alerting rival inventors or the general public."

Jack's fingers drummed against the table. "What kind of security should we expect?"

Arthur answered this time, sliding a sheet toward them—a rough floor plan of the fairgrounds. "It'll be heavy. Guards from the Ashmere Council. Private muscle from a few sponsors. You'll be navigating through crowds, kiosks, booths, and invention demonstrations. All while avoiding suspicion."

"Civilians too?" Harry asked.

“Civilians. Investors. Scholars. Noble brats who want to see the future before it bites them,” Arthur replied, his tone unreadable. “So keep your blades quiet, your hands clean, and your names out of the Chronicle.” Silas Thorn finally spoke, voice like gravel under silk. “You’ll only get one shot. The items may not be on display for long. Be smart. Be fast. Be forgettable.”

Jack’s jaw tightened. “Forgettable isn’t exactly the brand I’m going for.”

“Noted,” Silas said. He didn’t smile. A pause stretched in the room as Lannic watched the three of them. Then, as if satisfied, he reached into a drawer and pulled out a small black pouch, letting it fall to the table with a metallic *clink*. “Payment will be generous,” he said. “Upon successful retrieval. You’ll also have our favor—a token of goodwill. And believe me, a favor from the Cyphers opens more doors in Doskvol than coin alone.” Jack reached for the pouch—but Lannic placed a hand over it. “Not yet,” he said softly. “Trust first. Payment later.” Rabbit tilted his head. “Why us?” Lannic studied him. “Because you’re still small enough to slip under the notice of larger forces. And smart enough to want out from under that shadow.” He turned to Jack. “And because you’re hungry. I like hungry.” Jack met his eyes and nodded. “We’ll get it done.”

“I know you will,” Lannic said. He handed them a slim folder wrapped in leather cord. Inside were maps, fake passes, a list of merchant names, and three engraved invitation pins marked with the seal of the Doskvol Science & Industry League. “Burn these when the job’s over,” he added. Jack slipped the folder under his coat. “Anything else?”

“Just this,” Lannic said, standing. “If you’re caught… you don’t know us. You never met me. And if you name the Cyphers… you won’t leave Ironscar alive.” Jack smiled faintly. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The fog rolled thick over the fairgrounds, swallowing the cobblestone beneath their boots and wrapping the lanternlight in smoky halos. Steam hissed from unseen vents as brass pipes curled like ivy around the skeletons of temporary pavilions. It was early afternoon, but the sky above Doskvol barely noticed—grey and murky, like dishwater left out too long.

The Invention Fair stood like a miniature city within the city. Its makeshift walls were strung with banners that read *“Progress for a Brighter Empire”* and *“Tomorrow is Forged Today.”* Dozens of displays chattered, chimed, and roared around the trio as they passed beneath a wrought-iron arch that buzzed faintly with electroplasmic charge. Above it, an animatronic cherub pivoted on its post, welcoming guests with a jerky wave. Jack kept his coat pulled tight and his eyes sharper. He didn’t trust this place—not the fair, not the crowd, not the overly generous smiles of inventors pitching their machines like traveling salesmen. There was something too clean about it. Too polished. As if underneath all this polish was a trap ready to snap shut. “We’re not outgunned,” Jack said, glancing over his shoulder at the others. “We’re just underappreciated.” Rabbit gave him a flat look. “We’re outgunned.” Harry, who’d been quietly counting the guards stationed at the perimeter, nodded grimly. “He’s not wrong. I count... fifteen? No, sixteen. And that’s just the ones in uniform.”

“And at least twice that in plainclothes,” Rabbit added, his eyes narrowing behind his lenses. “Security’s thick. Too thick for a science fair.” Jack didn’t answer right away. He was watching a group of men in navy-blue coats converse by a locked cabinet marked with the sigil of the Council of Technological Advancement. One of them held a clipboard. Another held a rifle. Neither looked like they were here for the gadgets. The three moved deeper into the fair. Jack passed a booth advertising “Voice-Triggered Pocket Lighters” and another with a contraption

that claimed to “Sew Buttons With Gentle Steam.” The air reeked of oil, sawdust, and too much ambition. Rabbit’s Foot tilted his head, watching a display where a miniature clockwork orchestra was playing a hauntingly off-key waltz. “This place is ridiculous,” he muttered. “Half of this junk will explode if you breathe on it wrong.”

“That’s half the fun,” Jack replied, adjusting his scarf as they passed a vendor hawking mechanized stilts. “Just don’t breathe too hard near anything with a warning label.” They reached a crossroads between exhibition halls. To the left: larger installations, likely for vehicular innovations. To the right: pharmacology, alchemy, and arcane supplements. Jack glanced between them, then at his crew. “We’re close,” he said. “The blueprints for the automobile—whatever they’re calling it—will be in the heavy machinery hall. Probably locked in a secure display. Guarded. Watched. And not easy to duplicate or remove without someone noticing.” Rabbit crossed his arms. “And the elixir?”

“Likely under glass,” Jack replied. “Or behind a dozen wards.”

“Great,” Harry muttered. “One vial and one blueprint. Both buried in a maze full of cops and rich amateurs with too much money and no sense of smell.” Jack laughed under his breath. “It’s not a death sentence, Harry.”

“It’s damn close.” They stopped near a pavilion where an automaton with too many arms was stirring soup with one hand and playing the cello with another. A group of nobles clapped politely as it hit a sour note. Jack scanned the perimeter. “Relax,” he said. “I’ve got someone on the inside.” Rabbit looked over sharply. “What?” Jack didn’t elaborate. He just kept walking, the fog catching in his hair like threads of ghostly silk. Harry quickened his step. “Wait—what do you mean, ‘on the inside’? When were you going to tell us?” Jack waved a hand casually. “I didn’t want to jinx it.” Rabbit frowned. “Who is it?” Jack smirked without turning. “You’ll meet her after the job’s done. Assuming we’re all still breathing.” Harry stopped in his tracks. “Her?”

“Let it go,” Rabbit muttered. “We’ve got enough to deal with.” They turned down another aisle, passing displays of miniature dirigibles and self-heating teapots. Somewhere nearby, a speaker boomed with announcements about the upcoming “Innovation Duel,” whatever that meant. The fair was alive with distractions. But Jack wasn’t looking for fireworks. He was looking for shadows. They paused near a bench, beneath the flickering light of an arclamp. Rabbit pulled out a folded sketch he’d made of the layout Lannic provided. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than nothing. “This place is huge,” Rabbit muttered. “We’re not going to find both targets just wandering around.” Harry rubbed at his temple. “Then maybe we split up.” Jack turned to him. “What?”

“We split,” Harry said. “You look for the blueprints. I’ll head toward the alchemical section. Rabbit can float between, see what kind of security setup we’re dealing with.” Jack hesitated. Splitting up was risky. But it was also smart. They didn’t have time to poke around for hours. Finally, he nodded. “Alright. Meet back at the fountain in an hour. If someone doesn’t show, wait five minutes. Then assume they’re dead.” Harry snorted. “Cheerful.” Rabbit folded the sketch and tucked it away. “Let’s not screw this up. First real job for the Cyphers. First step into the real leagues.” Jack adjusted his gloves and gave a sharp, quiet grin. “Then let’s make it count.” The three turned and disappeared into the crowd, swallowed by the steam, the voices, and the pulse of invention thrumming beneath the cobblestones of Doskvol.

The crowd shifted like a living sea, parting only when forced, always eager to close again. Jack moved through it like smoke through cracks—quiet, unassuming, eyes scanning for an opportunity. He’d split from Rabbit and Harry less than five minutes ago, but already he felt the tension pressing behind his ribs. Then he saw it. The automobile, or rather, its *shrouded form*, sat perched on a raised iron platform toward the rear of the Machinery Pavilion. Thick canvas

draped over its shape, but the silhouette was unmistakable—a sleek, curved body, metal fixtures protruding like the horns of some steel beast. It hadn't been unveiled yet, but even hidden, it drew a crowd. People murmured, peering up with curiosity. Promises of revolution always drew an audience. And standing beside the platform, surrounded by a modest cluster of admirers and skeptics alike, was the man himself—Garrick Harlowe. He didn't look like an inventor. No soot-streaked apron, no nervous tics. He was sharply dressed in a deep navy coat, a silver pocket watch tucked into his vest, and a walking stick he clearly didn't need. His jawline was firm, his hair slicked back, and his eyes sharp as broken glass. He smiled when spoken to but watched each person like he was measuring their weight, intent, and usefulness. Jack lingered near the edge of the group, observing. No sign of Rabbit or Harry. Damn it. But then an idea sparked. Impulsive, reckless—his favorite kind. Jack took a breath, fixed his coat, and stepped forward, angling toward Harlowe like he belonged in the conversation.

"Mr. Harlowe," he said, weaving between a merchant and an alchemist, "an honor." The inventor turned his gaze on Jack with polite curiosity. "I'm afraid I don't believe we've met."

"No, we haven't. My name is John—" Jack caught himself mid-lie and leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "I'm here on behalf of Governor Cross Daava." Harlowe's expression flickered. Surprise? Suspicion? Hard to say. He recovered quickly, offering a small, measured nod. "The Governor, you say? Well. That's certainly a name that carries weight." Jack smiled warmly, putting just the right amount of formality in his voice. "He's very intrigued by your automobile. Naturally, he's avoiding public attention. But he's sent me to observe your work… and, if agreeable, request a more private discussion regarding your invention." Harlowe's eyes narrowed slightly. The crowd had thinned—other guests wandering to see glowing clocks or electroplasmic drills. Only a few loitered now, and none paid attention to Jack. He could feel the tension begin to coil between them. "I'm honored by the Governor's interest," Harlowe said carefully, adjusting one of his silver cufflinks. "But I must ask—why the secrecy?" Jack tilted his head, as though confiding a state secret. "You understand, I'm sure, how delicate this could be. If it were known that Daava was eyeing a machine capable of undermining entire industries—well, certain factions wouldn't be pleased. Horses, after all, have loud friends in old money."

That got a reaction—a twitch in the corner of Harlowe's mouth. The man was sharp. He knew the truth of that. And Jack saw the gleam in his eye now: ambition. If the Governor really *was* interested, this could make Harlowe rich, protected, powerful. But he still wasn't sold. Harlowe leaned lightly on his cane. "You'll forgive me, Mr…?" Jack didn't fill in the name. Harlowe continued, "...but I've had more than a few 'official representatives' approach me today. Merchants from Whitecrown. Military contractors from Severos. Even a woman claiming to speak on behalf of the Emperor's *cousin.* You'll understand why I'm cautious."

"Of course," Jack said, maintaining eye contact. "Which is why I came alone. No fanfare. No guards. The Governor didn't want a bidding war. He wanted a chance to see the blueprints first. Quietly. That's all." Harlowe's lips pressed into a thoughtful line. Then: "Blueprints are proprietary. I don't show them to just anyone."

"Even those who can protect them better than anyone else?" That hung in the air between them for a beat too long. Jack turned it into a smile and took a half-step back. "Of course. If you're uninterested, I'll report that. The Governor will understand. He'll just speak to your competitors instead." That one hit. Harlowe's brow creased, barely. "Wait," he said, the word almost involuntary. Jack paused, looked back. Harlowe was watching him now, calculating. There was an opening, but it was small. Jack knew better than to push it. He needed to plant just enough doubt, just enough intrigue, and let it grow. "I'll be near the west end of the fairgrounds," Jack said quietly. "The Governor's man is waiting. If you change your mind—if you'd like to discuss terms privately—you'll find me." With that, Jack turned on his heel and began to walk away. No

guards chased him. No one shouted. But he could feel Garrick Harlowe's eyes clinging to him like a hook in his spine.

He was almost clear when the man called after him, "Perhaps… we'd best discuss this in private." Jack turned slowly, letting his face flicker with surprise and measured curiosity. "Of course," he said smoothly, already sensing the shift in the current. The fish had nibbled the bait—just not the hook Jack thought he'd thrown. Harlowe gestured toward a side corridor draped in heavy blue curtains, flanked by a single guard—the same stiff, square-jawed man Jack had clocked earlier. Every movement he made was calculated and clean. The kind of posture only training—or fear—could instill. Without a word, the guard took point, and Jack followed Harlowe deeper into the fair's interior. The din of the invention floor faded behind them, replaced by the hush of carpets, walls, and secrets. Harlowe unlocked a narrow door tucked beside a closed-off exhibition room, ushering them into a tight chamber—dimly lit, two chairs, a cluttered desk with blueprints and parts stacked around it. The air smelled like ink and warm copper. "Forgive the modesty," Harlowe said, motioning for Jack to sit. "Privacy is a scarce commodity around here."

Jack nodded and took the seat, eyes scanning. No obvious safe. No blueprint on display. Nothing that gave away the prize. He was about to speak when a knock tapped against the door. Harlowe raised a brow, gave a nod, and the bodyguard cracked it open. A whisper. Muffled. A low response. Then, the guard turned back. "There's someone outside claiming to be this man's escort. Said it's urgent." Jack sighed with a practiced smile. "That would be my associate. I prefer not to walk into unknown meetings without a second set of eyes." Harlowe didn't look pleased. "You didn't mention you had company." Jack shrugged. "You didn't ask." Harlowe gave a small nod. "Very well. But let's keep this conversation intimate." The door opened again, and Rabbit's Foot stepped in, ducking slightly under the frame. His wide lenses shimmered faintly in the lamplight, and his hands were folded neatly behind his back.

Jack leaned toward him, voice low. "What are you doing here?" "Didn't like how deep you disappeared," Rabbit muttered. "Also… we're being watched. I think I've seen this guy before. Green coat. He's trailing us." Jack's stomach tensed. "Great. Another guest at the party." He was about to ask more when Harlowe finally spoke again.

"You'll forgive my caution, gentlemen," he said, folding his arms. "But I find it strange that a representative of Governor Daava would arrive here without official documentation. Or an appointment. Or… well… a name I recognize." Jack leaned forward, keeping his tone light. "The Governor values discretion." Harlowe's smile sharpened. "Ah. Discretion. That old cloak." He paced slowly around the desk now, watching both of them. "I must admit," he continued, "your timing is rather curious. I had a meeting with the Governor's office last week. His liaison was quite open—and generous." Jack stilled. "Oh?"

"Quite," Harlowe said. "Which makes your claim… puzzling." Rabbit, now uneasy, shifted his weight. "We didn't come here to start trouble." Harlowe didn't look at him. He was staring at Jack now, like a man measuring distance before a throw. "No, I suspect you came here hoping I wouldn't know better. But I do. And I'm also not foolish enough to leave the blueprints lying around." He tapped the desk. "You won't find what you're looking for in this room." Another knock. This one heavier. Harlowe smiled. "That would be the rest of my security detail. Three more men. They'll want to ask you both a few questions. I suggest you start thinking about your answers now." Jack felt the temperature in the room change—not physically, but like the stillness before a door slammed. Rabbit's hand dropped to his side. Not for a weapon. Yet. Just close. Just ready. Jack offered a smile—but it didn't reach his eyes. "Well then," he said quietly, "guess the game's really started." The door latch clicked again. Three shadows filled the doorway like falling guillotine blades.

Jack didn’t need an introduction to know what they were. The first man ducked slightly to enter, neck thick as a chimney stack, eyes like dull copper pennies. Behind him came a wiry one with a shaved head and hands wrapped in worn leather—bare-knuckle type. The third was older, slower maybe, but heavyset, with the careful balance of someone who'd fought in tight rooms before and always came out on top. The door shut behind them with a click that sounded far too final. “Well then,” Garrick Harlowe said, stepping back toward the wall with all the casual detachment of a man who just lit the fuse. “How about you both start explaining who you really are?” Jack’s eyes flicked to Rabbit. The taller man was frozen, not in fear—but in calculation. Then the first guard stepped forward and grabbed Rabbit by the arm. “Sit. Down.” Bad move.

Rabbit twisted hard, using the man's grip against him. With a snap of motion, he yanked the man forward and drove his knee straight into the side of his ribs. The man grunted—more annoyed than hurt—but Rabbit was already ducking low, sliding behind him and shoving him straight into the second guard. That was all the invitation Jack needed. He launched himself at the wiry one, fist aimed for the throat. The man parried with ease, catching Jack’s wrist and trying to twist it back. Jack bit down a yell, pivoted, and slammed his head forward. His forehead cracked against the man’s nose. Not enough to drop him—but enough to make him loosen his grip. Jack broke free, stumbling backward, shaking his hand out. Rabbit wasn’t so lucky. The first guard had recovered and caught Rabbit in a bear hug from behind, lifting him slightly off the floor. Rabbit grunted, elbows digging back, but the hold was tight. Jack darted forward, only to be intercepted by the heavyset one—an open-palm strike slammed into his chest, sending him crashing into a pile of crates. Wood splintered. Jack coughed, vision swimming. “Forget talking,” the heavy said, looming. “Break their legs.” Jack’s ears rang. He tried to stand—but his legs weren’t listening. Rabbit snarled. With a surge of motion, he jammed his heel down on the guard’s foot behind him. There was a crunch and a pained yell. The bear hug loosened just enough. Rabbit threw his head back hard—skull meeting nose with a sickening crunch. The big man dropped him. Jack saw his chance. Still on the floor, he reached for the side of the crate—splintered wood, broken nails—and jammed one upward into the heavy’s thigh as he stepped forward. The man howled, staggering. Jack scrambled to his feet and grabbed a wrench from a nearby workbench. The wiry guard came at him again, blood trickling down from his nose, eyes burning. Jack swung low. The wrench cracked against his knee. He screamed. Rabbit, now free, had gotten hold of a heavy metal rod from a display stand. As the big man charged again, Rabbit ducked and rammed the rod into his gut, doubling him over—then used both hands to club him over the back of the head. The man hit the ground with a thud and didn’t move. The remaining two came again—one limping, the other spitting blood—but now Jack and Rabbit had momentum. The fight devolved into a flurry of fists, elbows, and desperate swings. It was brutal, messy. No style. Just survival. Jack caught a punch to the jaw and responded with the wrench again—this time to the side of the neck. The wiry one crumpled. Rabbit kicked the last man straight in the chest, sending him crashing into the wall. He didn’t get up. For a long moment, the room was still. Just heavy breathing. Distant voices outside the fair. The sound of something dripping—maybe blood, maybe oil.

Ford stood frozen near the corner, pale as chalk. The smirk was long gone. Jack spit blood into his hand and glared at him. “Now,” he rasped, voice shaking but defiant, “why don’t we try this again?” Harlowe hadn’t moved. His back was still against the far wall, a streak of sweat now cutting through the polished calm he wore like armor earlier. He wasn’t smirking anymore—just breathing, shallow and rapid, like a man doing the math of his own odds and not liking the result. Jack adjusted his grip on the wrench. “You sure you want to play the proud inventor card right now?” His voice came out hoarse but steady. “Because we just went through three of your best. And I’m not in the mood for another round.” Rabbit didn’t speak. He loomed beside Jack, blood smeared along the side of his temple, metal rod still clenched in his hand. His silence did most of the talking. He looked like a man who wouldn’t ask twice. Harlowe raised his hands—half surrender, half defiance. “You’re making a mistake,” he said through gritted teeth. “You think the blueprints are here? I’d never store something that valuable in a glorified

showroom office. You're wasting time." Jack tilted his head. "Then why are you sweating bullets?"

Ford's eyes twitched. Jack followed the glance—barely a flick, but Rabbit saw it too. The far wall. Rabbit moved first, scanning it with deliberate steps. His fingers ran over an oddly framed section where a set of decorative tools hung on display—polished wrenches, an old blueprint in a glass frame. But one corner of the frame had no dust, no tarnish. Too clean. "Here," Rabbit muttered, and knocked his knuckles against the surface. Hollow. Harlowe moved. A desperate lunge—straight at Rabbit's exposed side, hands clawing, teeth bared in fury. But Jack was faster. He stepped in and slammed the wrench down onto Harlowe's shoulder with a sickening crunch. The inventor let out a grunt of pain and crumpled to the ground. Jack didn't wait. He dropped to one knee, rifled through Harlowe's coat. Pockets turned out keys, a ring of them—several brass, one polished black with a sigil etched into the teeth. That had to be it. Rabbit was already prying open the false wall. It gave with a pop, revealing a compact safe, the paint matching the wood grain so precisely it would've gone unnoticed if not for the inventor's betrayal.

"Got it?" Jack asked. Rabbit nodded. "Let's see if your little toy opens it." Jack slipped the sigil key into the safe, turned it once, and felt a solid, satisfying click. Inside was a leather-bound folder, thick and pristine. Jack pulled it free. On the cover, the words "Prototype Transport Series I: Internal Combustion Concept" gleamed in embossed ink. Jack opened the folder just long enough to see tight rows of mechanical sketches, math far beyond his own skill level, and an annotated stamp reading CONFIDENTIAL – PATENT PENDING. "That's our prize," he breathed. And then—*slam*.

The door to the room flew open, banging against the wall. Harry stood in the doorway, wild-eyed, drenched in sweat, both hands gripping a broken stool leg like it was a holy weapon. His coat was torn at the sleeve, and the knuckles on his right hand were red and raw. Just outside the room lay the crumpled body of another guard, face down and unmoving. "I got lucky," Harry panted, voice breathless. "Came around the side and caught him off guard. But…" He took a moment to collect himself. "People heard the fight. Somebody ran off. I think they went to get the Espiritas. We don't have long." The three of them froze. Even Jack, adrenaline still pulsing hot through his limbs, felt the cold twist of dread. The Espiritas Police. Not the usual beat cops. Not the bribable kind. These were the ones who wore polished boots and sanctified badges. The ones who showed up when *God* was offended by what you'd done. "We gotta move," Rabbit said, already tucking the folder into his coat. Jack spared one last look at Harlowe, groaning on the floor. "Let's not be here when he wakes up." They dashed past the unconscious bodies, Harry taking up the rear and watching the corners like prey expecting claws. Down the hallway, around the corner—Jack kept his head low and his steps light, but the pounding of his heart drowned out even their boots.

They'd gotten what they came for. Well—half of it. The blueprint folder was tucked safely inside Rabbit's coat, and the adrenaline was still crashing through Jack's limbs like the tide pounding against Doskvol's iron piers. But the job wasn't done. Not yet. The three of them emerged from the private corridor and stumbled back into the public chaos of the fairgrounds. Noise. Movement. A low rumble of panic had spread like ink through the crowd. People were pressed shoulder to shoulder, some trying to flee the disturbance, others standing on tiptoe, craning necks toward the source of the sounds—raised voices, the sharp *crack* of something heavy falling, someone screaming about broken glass and blood. Guards scrambled, barking orders, trying to push people back from one of the pavilions, but it was too little, too late. The crowd had devolved into half-curious, half-panicked chaos. None of the guards noticed the three men slipping back into the river of movement. Harry led the way, head down, face low. Jack and Rabbit flanked him, each trying to breathe evenly, not draw attention. "Okay," Jack muttered

under his breath, “we’ve got the blueprints. Just one more piece and we’re done.” Harry nodded. “I know where it is.”

“You what?” Rabbit looked over, raising an eyebrow. “I got eyes on it before I circled back to you,” Harry said, scanning the crowd ahead. “They’re keeping the elixir in a special tent across the fairgrounds—east side. There’s a whole section just for alchemical innovations. I followed the sign for ‘Vigor & Advancement.’ Didn’t get close, but I marked the entrance. I think I saw the security rotation too.” Jack smiled grimly. “God bless your nosy habits, Harry.”

“Come on. This way.” They pressed through the crowd, weaving between stalls and tents, past jugglers and street magicians trying desperately to keep attention on their acts while panic simmered beneath the surface. A bard’s music died mid-tune. Smoke still drifted from the direction of the earlier disturbance. By the time they reached the alchemical sector, the foot traffic was lighter. Controlled. A single bored-looking guard wandered near the main entrance, distracted, trying to keep a flock of children away from a glass container labeled *Do Not Ingest*. Harry didn’t even hesitate. He guided them around to the back of the largest tent, where the fabric was staked to a wooden frame. There, half-hidden behind stacked crates of equipment, was a narrow wooden door. Harry reached for the handle. “Here.” Jack glanced around, then nodded. The door creaked as they stepped inside. The scent hit them first—sharpening salts, floral essences, and the faint sting of volatile chemicals. Inside, shelves rose from floor to ceiling, filled with alchemical bottles—some round, some long-necked, some glowing faintly from within. Blues, greens, ambers, and purples. Each labeled in tight, alchemist’s scrawl. Rows and rows of reagents, tonics, stimulants, and poisons. A few lanterns swung from the ceiling, flickering with light filtered through colored glass. The whole place shimmered like a kaleidoscope in stillness. Harry pointed toward a locked cabinet on the far side. “That’s where it would be. Look for anything labeled *Z-53* or *E-Series*.” They began to fan out, stepping carefully. Jack ran his fingers along the labels. *Numbroot*. *Hawk’s Powder*. *Specter Dew*. Nothing useful yet. Then—

Click.

The door closed behind them with a whisper. Not a slam. Not a latch. Just… *click.* Jack turned sharply, his coat brushing a nearby shelf and rattling a row of delicately labeled vials. A man now stood between them and the only way out. He hadn't been there seconds ago. No footsteps. No breath. Just *there*—like a ghost stepping in from the fog. The lanternlight shifted as it touched him, highlighting the hard angles of his face, the slick sheen of rain still clinging to the shoulders of his coat. He was tall and lean, with the kind of rigid stillness that didn’t come from fear—but from restraint. Black boots. Dark gloves. A coat reinforced at the seams and shoulders, made for movement and impact. A burn scar cut like a pale vine down his left cheek, just soft enough to be healed, just fresh enough to look earned. His expression was unreadable. Controlled. Like he was holding back an entire storm just behind his eyes. “You made quite the mess tonight,” the man said calmly, eyes locked on Jack. His voice was smooth—*too* smooth. Like a knife gliding on whetstone. “Didn’t think I’d catch up to you so soon.” Rabbit stepped to Jack’s side, lips drawing tight. “Who the hell are you supposed to be?” The man took a casual step forward. The lantern above him flickered slightly, catching the glint of metal studs running along the seam of his gloves. “Name’s Bruce Wallunde,” he said. “You don’t know me, but I know you.” He reached behind him, closed the door with one hand. Another *click.* A final one. No way out.

Jack shifted his weight instinctively, not enough to draw attention. Just enough to be ready. Bruce scanned each of them—Jack, Rabbit, Harry—like he was filing them away. His blue-gray eyes moved without hurry. Not the stare of someone afraid. The kind of gaze you saw on men who’d walked into ambushes and come out alone. “You’ve been leaving a trail,” Bruce said. “One prison break. Two break-ins. A dead inventor. Explosives, property damage, and

now—stealing from a public science fair?" He looked around the small alchemical storeroom. Shelves of volatile compounds. Locked cabinets of chemicals. It would take nothing at all for this place to become a firestorm. "You're making the wrong kind of friends," Bruce added. Jack raised an eyebrow. "And you're what, a fan club? Maybe here to ask for an autograph?" Bruce's jaw twitched. The ghost of a smile. "I'm a bounty hunter. I was contracted for a retrieval. You three." He tapped one gloved finger against his chest. "Alive, preferably dead tho."

"Preferably?" Rabbit muttered. Bruce ignored him. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing, but I've been watching. Since the day you stole him. You didn't think you would get away with it, right?" Jack didn't answer. His mind was turning too fast for his tongue. Bruce continued. "You weren't on anyone's radar a month ago. Now people are starting to get curious." He took another step forward, slow and deliberate. The chemical vials trembled on the shelves. "People like you don't just *rise* out of nowhere. Someone gave you a ladder. The only question is… who? And why?" Harry swallowed hard. "You're not here to talk." Bruce looked at him for the first time. "No. I'm here for a job really." Jack froze. Bruce was watching them now. Too closely. Jack kept his expression neutral. Curious. But not afraid. Not yet.

"You've got about twenty seconds," Bruce said. "You surrender now, or I take all three of you in pieces." Jack raised his hands slowly. "Alright. Let's not turn this into something messy." Jack's hands remained up—at least half-raised—as he stepped in front of Rabbit. "Alright," he said, voice slow and measured. "Let's talk about this. What is it we stole that has you so eager to kill us over?" Bruce didn't blink. "You know what it is."

"If we did," Rabbit said, glancing at Jack, "maybe we could give it back." Bruce cocked his head slightly, studying Rabbit like a specimen. "No, you wouldn't. You people don't give things back. You *take.* And then run."

"Still," Rabbit pressed, his tone more diplomatic now, hands open at his sides. "We're not looking to die in a room full of combustibles. You've got a job to do. We get it. But maybe there's a way we both walk out of here. You get what you need, and we get to breathe another day." Bruce said nothing. His body didn't relax—didn't even shift. Just that same stone-like stillness. His hand twitched once toward his belt. A pouch there. Tools. Gadgets. Jack noticed something else. Harry. Quiet. Too quiet. He stood just behind them, breathing through his nose, eyes locked on Bruce. His usual twitchy curiosity was gone, replaced by something cold and unreadable. Jack filed that away for later. Right now—

Bruce moved.

It wasn't a warning. No flare of anger, no last threat. One second he stood there, and the next, his hand whipped forward. A small metal disk clattered across the floor and erupted in a burst of blinding light and crackling sound. "Flash bomb!" Jack shouted, but too late. The room bloomed in white. Ears rang. Shelves shook. Rabbit lunged blindly, tackling where he thought Bruce had been—but Bruce had already spun left, letting Rabbit's weight carry him into a rack of bottles that exploded in a spray of liquid and shattered glass. Jack staggered sideways, blinking the stars out of his eyes. He felt more than saw Bruce's next move—a knee slamming into his ribs, knocking him back against a shelf. He grabbed a vial as he fell and flung it instinctively. It burst against Bruce's shoulder in a splash of burning tincture. The man snarled—just a flicker of pain—but it didn't slow him. Harry, silent as ever, came in with a crowbar raised like a bat. Bruce ducked under the swing, caught Harry's wrist, and twisted hard. The crowbar fell with a clang. Harry dropped to a knee, gasping. Rabbit was up again, blood trickling from his scalp. He drew a knife from inside his coat and slashed forward—Bruce twisted, grabbed Rabbit's wrist mid-swing, and drove an elbow into his chest. Rabbit coughed, but managed to bring a knee up into Bruce's thigh, throwing the bigger man off for a split second. Jack launched himself forward. He threw a punch—Bruce ducked it, grabbed his coat, and used Jack's own momentum to flip

him over onto the floor. Jack's back slammed into the ground, knocking the breath from his lungs. Then Bruce was on him, boot on his chest, hand reaching again for something—another gadget, probably a shock prod or worse. Rabbit staggered forward but was caught in a grapple and shoved hard against a shelf. Harry tried to rise, but Bruce turned, tossing a glass bottle directly into his face. Harry stumbled back with a cry, clutching his eye. Jack gasped, trying to draw air into bruised lungs. Bruce stood over him now, one boot still planted. His chest heaved with controlled breaths. His coat was torn. A cut trickled blood down his temple. But he looked like a man with plenty of strength left to kill. Jack's fingers clawed for anything—anything at all. A shard of glass. A metal flask. He gritted his teeth and tried to lift it—

BOOM.

The door behind Bruce exploded open, ripping off one of its hinges. Smoke and dust poured in—and so did *she.* A tall figure framed in the light. Blonde hair caught in the lanterns' flicker. Rifle in her hands. Harleena. She moved fast. Bruce spun to face her, but he was too slow this time. Her rifle swung low—not to shoot—but to strike. The barrel cracked against his jaw with a sound like a snapped bone. He reeled. She stepped in close, slammed her elbow into his sternum, then dropped low and swept his legs with one brutal kick. Bruce hit the ground hard. He rolled instinctively, already reaching for another weapon, but Harleena was faster. She planted her boot on his wrist and pressed down. Hard. "You don't wanna pull that," she growled. Her voice was rough, low, and full of steel. Bruce froze. Blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. His eyes locked on hers. Then—he smiled. Not wide. Not gloating. Just… interested. "You," he muttered. She didn't reply. Her rifle stayed steady. Jack, still gasping for air, forced himself upright. "You took your time."

"Had to find the right door," Harleena said coolly, still keeping Bruce pinned. Rabbit limped over, face bruised, hair wet with blood. "Who the hell is *this*?" Jack smiled despite the pain in his ribs. "Boys," he said, catching his breath, "meet my *friend.*" Harleena finally looked at Jack, her eyes flicking to the bruise on his jaw, the way he held his ribs. "You look like shit."

"We missed you too." Jack's gaze dropped to Bruce, who was watching them all now—not fearful, not beaten. Just calculating. Something told Jack this wasn't over. Harleena turned sharply to Jack, her voice low but urgent. "Do your *zappy thing.* Fast."

Jack blinked. "What?" She jerked her head toward Bruce, who was beginning to stir, trying to shake the stars from his vision. "We've got maybe thirty seconds before uniforms flood that door. I didn't knock him out forever. Make it count." Jack swallowed hard. He hated this part. It wasn't just dangerous—it was invasive. But the stakes were too high now. He staggered forward, eyes still watery from the fight, and dropped to a knee beside Bruce. Bruce's eyelids fluttered. He was dazed, but conscious. Jack reached out, grabbed his chin, and forced him to look up. "Eyes on me, big guy," Jack muttered. Bruce resisted—only slightly—but his head lolled back into Jack's grasp, their eyes locking. And then it happened. Jack opened the door inside himself. He felt his mind push forward—like stepping off a ledge into a swirling storm. The world around him blurred, sound muffled into a low hum. He plunged into Bruce's gaze, deeper than just sight—deeper than thought. A shimmer rippled across his vision. Tendrils of memory flared behind Bruce's eyes like branching lightning. Images—snapshots—flashed by. The prison break. The chase through Silkbend. The meeting with a mysterious client. Their faces. Jack found the memory. The fair. The elixir. The confrontation. And he cut. Just one memory. Clean. As surgical as he could make it. The connection snapped with a jolt that rattled his spine. Jack fell back on one hand, blinking rapidly. Bruce slumped against the shelf, eyes wide and unfocused, his chest rising and falling in uneven gasps. Harleena crouched beside him. "Did it work?"

“I don’t know,” Jack muttered, his voice raw. “Maybe. His mind’s tough. Could be fragmented. Could come back in pieces.” Harry hovered nearby, knuckles white on his makeshift club. “What the hell was that? What did you *do* to him?” Jack didn’t look at him. “I can... push into minds. If I have eye contact. If they’re weak enough. Distracted. I can remove things. Memories.”

“Since when?” Rabbit asked, his voice flat. Suspicious. Jack stood slowly, wincing as pain laced through his ribs. “Since always.”

“And how many times have you—”

Before Rabbit could finish, the door behind them creaked open again. Not with force this time—but with slow, methodical pressure. Three fair security guards stepped in, batons out and jaws tight. Behind them, clad in the dark blue and gold trim of the Espiritas Police, stood a tall woman with a badge on her chest and the look of someone who very much wanted to start making arrests. The whole room froze. Without missing a beat, Harleena stood tall, slinging her rifle behind her and raising her hands casually. “About time you showed up,” she said coolly. “Name’s Harleena. Hired security for the fair.” The Espiritas officer frowned. “This your post?”

“No,” Harleena said, jerking her thumb at Bruce. “But I followed this man in here after seeing him snoop around the elixir tent. He got aggressive when I confronted him. When I entered, I found him assaulting these three civilians.” The officer’s eyes narrowed. “These three?”

“Visitors,” Harleena confirmed. “Got caught in the mess. Scared, obviously.” She gave a subtle glance to the trio. “But they held their own.” Jack cleared his throat and gave a weak smile. “Uh, yeah. Just came to see the fair. Got a bit more than we paid for.” Rabbit nodded along, adjusting his glasses with a subtle tremor in his hand. “He came at us like a lunatic. Thought he was going to blow the place up.” Harry just held up the crowbar and gestured vaguely to the shelves. “We tried not to die. That’s about all we did.” The officer stepped into the room, studying them, then Bruce. He groaned slightly, still out of sorts, blinking at the ceiling like it didn’t make sense. One of the security guards looked confused. “He’s got ID. Name’s Bruce Wallunde. Says he’s with... uh, warranted retrieval.” The officer frowned deeper. “He didn’t check in through proper channels.” Harleena folded her arms. “Doesn’t surprise me. A real bounty hunter wouldn’t have endangered civilians or gone off protocol.” There was a pause. Then, finally, the officer sighed. “We’ll sort it out back at the post. Escort him out. I’ll need all your names and statements. You’ll be contacted if charges are pressed.” Jack gave a dramatic sigh of relief. “Anything to help. We’re just glad it’s over.” As the guards lifted Bruce between them and started dragging him out, the bounty hunter looked back, his face pale but unfocused. No recognition. Not of Jack. Not of Rabbit. Not even of the place around him. Jack looked away. He hated using that part of himself. But sometimes, the fog was the only way out.

The door clicked shut behind the last uniform. Silence stretched across the shattered alchemical room, broken only by the low hum of bubbling vials and the distant murmur of a dispersing crowd. Rabbit leaned back against a shelf, one arm draped over a bruised rib. Harleena, still on edge, eyed the door for a few more seconds before relaxing her grip on her rifle. Jack let out a shaky breath and turned toward Harry, who hadn’t said a word since Bruce was dragged out unconscious. It was Harry who finally broke the silence. “We still need to find it,” he said. Jack blinked. “What?”

“The elixir,” Harry clarified, glancing toward the shelves. “It’s the other half of the job, right?”

“Oh. Right.” Jack nodded, the rush of the brawl still buzzing in his head. “Yeah.”

“She’s one of us,” he added quickly, noticing Rabbit’s wary glance toward Harleena. “You can trust her.”

“I *just* saved your neck, sweetheart,” Harleena muttered as she moved toward a shelf near the back, ignoring the trail of spilled glass and scattered chemicals. Harry scowled. “That doesn’t mean she knows where the elixir is.” Harleena snorted. “You’re all so exhausting.”

She reached up with sure hands and plucked a bottle from an untouched section of the wall. It shimmered faintly—light blue, with a swirling glow inside like a bottled storm. E-Series: Z-53. The label was unmistakable. “This is it,” she said, holding it up between thumb and forefinger. Rabbit stared. “How do you *know*?” Harleena tilted her head, incredulous. “Because it’s been the centerpiece of this entire section for the past hour. They did *two demonstrations* with it. One on a horse. One on a dog. Crowds gathered. Announcers shouted. Where the hell were *you*?” Rabbit rubbed the back of his head, a little sheepishly. “Busy getting tackled by mercenaries.” Harleena rolled her eyes and slipped the elixir into a padded pouch on her coat. “Maybe next time try reading a sign or two before blowing things up.”

“We didn’t blow anything up,” Jack muttered.

“Not *yet,*” she shot back.

They all moved to the back of the room again, trying to get their bearings. Jack was already thinking through the escape route when Rabbit’s voice cut through the air again—sharp, focused. “Wait. Before we leave—Harry, you owe us an explanation.” Harry looked up sharply. “Now? Seriously?” Jack folded his arms. “You’ve been acting off since the brawl. And Bruce said he was after *us.* Not just the elixir. He’s been following us since we broke out that prisoner. That was weeks ago.” Rabbit nodded. “So what the hell did you steal?” Harry hesitated. Then he sighed. “That day… when we were in the Governor’s House,” he began slowly. “You remember the captain’s office? The door was cracked open.” Jack nodded. “Yeah. We passed it on the way out.”

“Well, I saw something in there. Something golden. Looked expensive. There was no one around, and the guards were chasing us somewhere else. So I grabbed it.” Jack narrowed his eyes. “What *was* it?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “It’s… a rod, I think. Or a staff? Gold, smooth. A bit longer than your arm. Tapered at the base, like a spike. But the top… it’s got these weird blade things, like wings. And there’s this round gem at the center. Looks like an eye.” Rabbit stared. “An eye?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “And the weird thing is, it *feels* wrong. Or powerful. I can’t tell. But it hums. Not like a machine. Like… in your chest. Like it’s alive or something.” Jack’s voice lowered. “Where is it now?”

“Wrapped in linen. Stuffed at the bottom of my trunk. Haven’t touched it since. It gives me the creeps.” Harleena looked between them. “And let me guess. You didn’t think to mention this before tonight?”

“I didn’t know it was important!” Harry snapped. “It looked valuable, sure. But I didn’t know anyone was tracking it. Or that they’d send a hunter like *him.*” Rabbit whistled softly, running a hand through his hair. “So let’s get this straight—we weren’t just being hunted because of Merrow. Or the fair. This… *thing* you picked up, it’s what someone really wanted back.”

“And they almost got it,” Jack muttered. “We nearly died tonight.” Harleena crossed her arms. “Whatever it is, it’s not ordinary. Not if it drew *him.*” They were quiet for a moment. Just the sound of glass settling on shelves. “We need to study it,” Jack said finally. “See what it does. Why it matters. But not here. And not tonight.”

“Agreed,” Rabbit nodded. “Let’s get out while we still can.” Harleena raised an eyebrow. “And next time you pick up a cursed antique, Harry—maybe ask someone first.” He gave her a sheepish shrug. “Noted.” They slipped back into the fairgrounds through the same rear door, their prize in Harleena’s coat, a thousand questions still unanswered… and one Umbral Rod waiting in a trunk across the city, quietly humming in the dark.

Getting out wasn’t hard—not anymore.

The shattered glass, the overturned shelves, the unconscious bounty hunter—none of it mattered once the Espiritas Police arrived. Harleena’s lie about being hired security held. The badge she flashed looked real enough. Her commanding tone did the rest. Jack, Rabbit, and Harry leaned into the story like seasoned actors. Shocked expressions, nervous stammering, exaggerated wounds—perfect victims of a violent madman in a coat. The officer in charge barked a few orders, and no one looked too closely. After all, chaos was already bleeding through the fair like ink on wet parchment. One more thread in the tangle was hardly worth pulling. They slipped out with the crowd—blending into the fearful, the nosy, the clueless. No one chased them. No one called their names. But still, Jack didn’t breathe properly until they turned a corner and the sounds of the fair died behind them. The group moved through the alleys like phantoms, darting between laundry lines and broken lamplight, navigating the veins of Doskvol by instinct. Harleena led part of the way, always a few steps ahead, checking corners. Jack clutched the folder tight under his coat, the blueprints still warm from the safe. Beside him, Rabbit carried the elixir like a priest might hold relics. And Harry—well, Harry looked like a man who knew just how close he'd come to never walking again. They didn’t speak much. The city was too loud for that. Church bells in the distance. Sirens. The low hum of power coursing through cables overhead. And somewhere—too far to track—the slow, quiet ticking of whatever clockwork they'd just started.

By the time they reached Lannic’s Tech Emporium, the moon was high, thin and sharp as a blade above the rooftops. The shopfront was still—its windows casting a soft orange glow onto the cobblestones. A passerby might think it was closed, or maybe just the sort of place that sold dusty gadgets no one remembered how to use. But beneath the floorboards, down the iron spiral stairs and behind the false wall in the backroom corridor—the Cyphers were waiting. The trio entered without hesitation. Harleena followed, though her steps slowed just slightly, eyes scanning the edges of the shop with quiet familiarity. The woman at the counter—still playing her role as innocent shopkeep—nodded once and wordlessly pushed open the hidden door. The four descended. The hum of machines greeted them immediately. Hushed voices. Ticking gears. The scent of solder and oil. It was like stepping into another world—one carved from brass and electricity, lit by flickering tubes and spectral energy banks. Lannic Morrow stood at the center of it all, behind a wide metal desk covered in tools and papers, with Arthur Xavier at his right and another Cypher hunched over a half-dissected drone in the corner. Lannic turned as they entered, the burn-scarred half of his face catching the light like tarnished gold. His mechanical finger clicked faintly against the edge of his cup.

“You’re late,” he said, though not unkindly. His voice was still the same—smooth, calculated, with a razor-thin thread of command woven into every syllable.

“We ran into some complications,” Jack said.

Rabbit rolled his shoulder with a wince. “And then we ran into someone’s fist. Several times.”

Harry slumped onto a crate. “And then someone *exploded* through a door.”

Lannic’s eyes flicked to Harleena. He gave a slight nod. “I heard you might be joining us.”

She offered him a salute that could've been sarcastic or respectful—or both. "Would've sent a note, but I was busy saving your newest allies from their own cleverness."

Jack stepped forward and handed over the blueprints, still in their folded case. Rabbit passed him the elixir next. Lannic received them both without a word, his sharp eyes scanning the labels, the wax seals, the contents inside. "Excellent work," he said after a pause. "Very few crews could have pulled off a dual acquisition at the city's largest invention showcase. And *survived.*" He looked up at them. "You've earned more than coin tonight. You've earned consideration."

Jack arched a brow. "That sounds vague enough to be dangerous." Arthur snorted from his seat. "Means he likes you. Don't ruin it." Harleena crossed her arms. "So? What now? You send them on some suicide mission, or are we all going to take a nap for once?"

"There's always more work," Lannic said, placing the elixir into a locking crate. "But I imagine you're not here to live quietly." Jack gave a tired smile. "What gave it away?"

With business concluded for the night, the four of them made their way back out into the city. This time, they walked slower. No alarms. No blood. No bounty hunter breathing down their necks. Their hideout wasn't much—a dilapidated old townhouse half-sunken into the stone near the edge of Crow's Ward. The lower floors were barely habitable, and the roof leaked like a sieve. But the basement? The basement was theirs. Crates for chairs. Blankets nailed over windows. One lantern hanging from a wire. It smelled like oil and dirt and secrets. They laid the blueprint folder on the table. Jack poured a drink. Rabbit sat down and took off his boots. Harry dropped his satchel and finally pulled out the Umbral Rod—still wrapped in linen, still humming quietly like a stormcloud on a leash. They all stared at it for a long while.

"…Well," Rabbit finally said, voice hoarse. "That was one hell of a night."

Jack raised his glass. "To the crew with no name."

Harleena sighed and slumped into a chair. "Let's fix that soon."

Outside, the city went on pretending nothing had happened. The streets hummed. The mist rolled in from the bay. Somewhere far away, the Espiritas Police locked up an unconscious bounty hunter with scrambled memories and a list of questions no one could answer.

But in the basement of a house that shouldn't still be standing, four people sat around a table with the blueprints to revolutionize transport, a miracle drug that shouldn't exist, and an ancient, golden artifact that none of them understood.

The job was done.

But the game?

The game was just beginning.

News: Mystery Unfolds at Local Science Fair: Bounty Hunter Arrested, Invention Unveiled Amidst Chaos

In the dimly lit confines of the Shadows' Den, a cosy yet slightly eerie tavern nestled in the heart of Doskvol, two locals sat at a small corner table. The flickering glow of lanterns cast long shadows across their faces, adding a layer of intrigue to their discussion. Agnes Reid, a stout woman in her late forties with a keen interest in the news, was leafing through a well-worn copy of the Blade Chronicle. Her companion, Thomas Shaw, a lanky man in his thirties with a perpetual air of curiosity, sat opposite her, nursing a half-empty pint.

Agnes: (turning the newspaper around to Thomas) "Thomas, you have to see this. It's all over the Blade Chronicle today."

Thomas: (leaning in) "Oh? What's the latest scandal?"

Agnes slid the newspaper across the table, and Thomas scanned the headlines with growing interest.

Thomas: (reading aloud) "'In a startling turn of events at the Inventions fair held last week, what was meant to be a showcase of innovation and discovery turned into a scene of chaos and tragedy.'"

Agnes: "Yes, and it's just dreadful. The fair was supposed to be such a grand event. Now look at it."

Thomas: "Sounds like quite a mess. What happened exactly?"

Agnes: (gesturing at the newspaper) "'Among the central figures of the unfolding drama was Bruce Walunde, a well-known bounty hunter, whose arrest sent shockwaves through the community. Walunde, renowned for his prowess in tracking down elusive targets, found himself on the other side of the law when he was apprehended after sustaining heavy wounds.'"

Thomas: (frowning) "Bruce Walunde? The bounty hunter? He's always been portrayed as a hero in the papers."

Agnes: "That's just it! I can't believe he'd be involved in anything so nefarious. He's always been on the right side of the law."

Thomas: (sceptical) "Well, that's what makes it interesting. Sometimes the public image and reality don't line up."

Agnes: "But Bruce? It doesn't add up. Why would he be in trouble at a science fair of all places?"

Thomas: (continuing to read) "'The circumstances surrounding his arrest remain shrouded in mystery, leaving many to wonder what transpired in the moments leading up to the altercation.'"

Agnes: "See? Even the newspaper isn't clear on why he was arrested. It's not like him at all."

Thomas: (nodding) "That's true. But look here: 'Adding to the confusion was the sudden intrusion of the Espiritas officials, whose presence disrupted the proceedings of the science fair.'"

Agnes: "Espiritas officials? Why would they be involved in a science fair?"

Thomas: (reading on) "'The interruption was caused because of the death of two individuals, identified as employees of the esteemed inventor Garrick Harlowe. Harlowe, widely regarded for his

ingenuity and visionary creations, was on the cusp of unveiling his latest invention to the world—the automobile.'"

Agnes: "Garrick Harlowe's big reveal? The automobile? That was supposed to be a huge breakthrough!"

Thomas: "Exactly. And now it's overshadowed by this mess. 'The revelation of such groundbreaking technology promised to revolutionise transportation as we know it, yet the joyous occasion was marred by tragedy and uncertainty.'"

Agnes: "It's tragic, isn't it? But it still doesn't explain why Bruce would be caught up in this."

Thomas: (sceptical) "Well, sometimes people get tangled up in things they shouldn't be. Bruce could have been at the wrong place at the wrong time—or maybe there's more to it."

Agnes: "But to think Bruce could be involved in something shady? I just don't buy it."

Thomas: (continuing) "'As authorities scrambled to contain the situation, rumours began to circulate regarding the disappearance of a local security guard and three guests in attendance (two men and a woman).'"

Agnes: "Disappearance? That's not just chaos; it's a full-blown mystery. And the police aren't saying anything more."

Thomas: "Yes, and look at this: 'Attempts to glean further information from the police have been met with silence, fueling speculation and intrigue within the community.'"

Agnes: "It's like they're deliberately hiding something. But Bruce being involved? I just don't think so."

Thomas: "You might be right, or maybe he's being framed. Either way, something doesn't sit right. 'Amidst the turmoil and unanswered questions, one thing remains clear: the events that unfolded at the science fair have left a lasting impact on all those involved. As the investigation continues and the truth slowly emerges from the shadows, residents are left to ponder the implications of this fateful day—a day that will be remembered not for the triumphs of science, but for the mysteries that remain unsolved.'"

Agnes: "That's the part that really gets to me. So many questions, and no clear answers."

Thomas: "Exactly. I mean, Bruce Walunde could be the hero or the scapegoat in this. We don't know yet. But I wouldn't be too quick to rule out anything."

Agnes: "I suppose. But Bruce has always seemed so above board. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding."

Thomas: "Could be. Or maybe there's a darker side to this whole mess. The fair's collapse, Bruce's arrest—it all seems too coincidental."

Agnes: "Well, if Bruce really is involved in something shady, I'd want to know the full story before jumping to conclusions."

Thomas: "Agreed. In the meantime, let's keep our ears open. There's bound to be more coming out about this."

Agnes: "Definitely. And I'll be watching closely. This story is far from over."

As their conversation wound down, both Agnes and Thomas sat in thoughtful silence. The newspaper, now folded and set aside, served as a stark reminder of the complex and often murky nature of Doskvol's news. Their discussion had highlighted the divide between faith in Bruce Walunde's integrity and scepticism about the true nature of the unfolding events.

Chapter 3: Skyward Skirmish: A Race Above Doskvol

The city never truly slept. Not even in Crow's Ward, where silence was just a different kind of noise. Mist hissed through broken eaves, puddles reflected the gutter-lights like cracked glass, and the wind always carried whispers you couldn't trust. Inside the house that shouldn't be standing, Harleena was already awake. She sat on a crate beside the basement stairs, one boot laced, the other forgotten, listening to the distant clink of metal from below. The smell of rubbing alcohol and burnt cloth filled the stairwell. She winced at a muffled curse—then another. The clatter of a tray. A low groan. Dr. Lazarus Finch was awake too. A weathered figure with bags beneath his eyes and skin like old parchment, Finch looked like a man stitched together from bad memories and good intentions. He'd taken up residence in the cellar's far corner—a corner Jack had proudly designated *the clinic.* Harleena wasn't sure how to feel about that.

She wandered down the stairs, boots echoing on concrete, and found Finch hunched over a pallet that served as an operating table. A wiry man—*Jim Bob,* from the look of it—lay bleeding from a gash across his side. He groaned as Finch worked, pressing a steaming iron to cauterize the wound. "Good morning," Finch muttered without looking up. "Try not to breathe too loudly. He might die if I flinch."

"I'll hold my applause," Harleena said, arms crossed. "Busy morning?"

"Two stab wounds, one overdose, one man who thinks he swallowed a spirit. Just another Tuesday." He gave her a quick side glance. "Didn't you say this house was supposed to be *abandoned*?" She exhaled slowly. "That's what worries me." The clinic idea had been Jack's. "Free medicine for the desperate, cheap medicine for the shady," he'd said. "We charge what they can pay. They pay what they can hide." It made sense—Doskvol always needed doctors willing to look the other way. But lately, Harleena had started noticing things: the loiterers, the rustle of voices in the alley, the odd silhouettes at the window just after dusk. Too many shadows. Too many people who knew where to look. "What happens when the neighbours notice?" she asked. "What happens when the Espiritas Police notice?" Finch wiped his hands on a rag and met her gaze. "We keep the bodies buried and the mouths shut. That's how it's always been." That didn't make her feel better.

She started upstairs, footsteps heavy with thought. She was halfway through boiling tea when the front door burst open. Jack's voice tore down the stairs like a thundercrack: "EVERYONE UP! I GOT SOMETHING!"

A groan came from the back room. Rabbit's Foot, grumpy and shirtless, dragged himself out from under a mound of coats. "Too early, Jack," he grumbled, rubbing his eyes. Harry, in his oversized sweater and perpetually uneven scarf, poked his head out from the corner near the rod. "We're under attack?" he asked, half-alarmed, half-hopeful. Jack stumbled down into the basement, cheeks flushed with the cold, a manic grin on his face. His coat was too light for the season, his boots were muddy, and his fingers tapped the wall like he was too excited to stand still. "I've got news," he said breathlessly. "Good news. Great news. Job-of-a-lifetime kind of news." Harleena raised an eyebrow. "Is this the kind of job that ends with us dead or imprisoned?"

"No," Jack said. "Better. This one ends with us *famous.*" Rabbit slumped into a chair and reached for the leftover coffee from last night. "You say that every time."

"I mean it this time." Jack pointed at Harry. "Put the kettle on. Everyone sit. I talked to Ezra." That got their attention. Even Rabbit paused mid-sip.

“The Bartender Ezra?” Harleena asked. Jack nodded. “He called us the new crew from Crow’s Ward. Said people are *talking* about us. That last job? Word’s getting around.” Harry beamed. “Does this mean we get to pick our name now?” Jack ignored him. “He gave me a tip. Two jobs. One of them’s... wild. There’s a rich gambling addict—like, stupid rich—who hosts an illegal balloon race every year. One rule: no guns. Everything else? *Fair game.* It’s dirty, it’s dangerous, and there’s *coin to be made.*” Rabbit blinked. “Did you say balloon race?” Jack grinned. “A sky race. Through Doskvol. With flying death machines, magical sabotage, and an audience of drunk nobles placing bets from their ivory towers.” Harry’s eyes widened. “That sounds... incredible.” Harleena narrowed hers. “That sounds like a death wish.”

“Maybe,” Jack said, eyes gleaming. “But it’s the perfect storm. Ezra says the Stoneborn kids are entering. I say we join them, boost our rep, maybe win big. But that’s not all.” He leaned in. The flickering lantern cast shadows over his face, making him look ten years older and far more dangerous. “There’s a second opportunity,” he said. “The Skarrenfolk are trying to stop the city from reopening the Old Port. If someone were to... say... make that port unusable, they’d owe a *lot* of favors. That someone could be us.”

Rabbit’s eyes sharpened. “Do both.”

“Exactly.” Jack looked at Harleena. “We enter the race, help the Stoneborn win, and make a deal with Elara Voss. We rig the balloon to blow *after* the finish line. One race, two wins.” Silence. Harleena stared at him, tea forgotten in her hand. “You’re insane.”

“I’m ambitious,” Jack replied. Rabbit stood slowly, stretching his back. “We’ll need blueprints. Altitude checks. Escape plans. Some sort of cover for the explosion.” Harry nodded, suddenly full of ideas. “I can prep charms, maybe enchant the balloon for speed.” Harleena looked around at the three of them—Jack grinning like a lunatic, Rabbit already strategizing, Harry scribbling notes in the margins of an old spellbook. She closed her eyes, just for a second, and let the chaos wash over her.

The fog was thick that night—heavier than usual, like a warning whispered into the bones of the city. Doskvol’s docks were always a place of shadows and motion, but tonight, it felt like the whole harbor was holding its breath. Steam hissed from rusted valves. Water slapped lazily against barnacled hulls. The sky was choked with low clouds, blotting out the moon, and the only real light came from the dull orange glow of sodium lanterns scattered across the wharf. In the distance, the outline of the ghostly Leviathan Hunter towers stood tall—silent sentinels over the water.

Four figures moved through the maze of crates and cranes, their boots echoing softly across weathered planks and oily stone. Jack walked in front, unusually quiet, his enthusiasm from earlier replaced with a more measured determination. This was not just a business meeting—it was a gamble, one of the biggest he had made yet. Behind him, Rabbit’s Foot walked with his usual languid grace, eyes darting through the shadows. Harleena flanked the group’s rear, rifle slung but close at hand, her coat pulled tight against the chill. Harry kept close to the middle, shoulders hunched against the damp air, hand resting protectively on the satchel still carrying that strange, Umbral Rod they’d retrieved—still wrapped in linen, still thrumming like a live wire.

They reached the dockside edge where the waters churned black and restless. There, half-hidden by mooring posts and collapsed scaffolding, was the vessel they were looking for: an old cargo ship, long decommissioned, left to rot in the harbor like so many others. But this one was different. This one was alive.

The ship had a name stenciled on its rusted hull in faded Skarrenfolk script—The Refuge at Anchor—though most locals simply called it *the Refuge*. From the outside, it was a rusted skeleton, a derelict vessel too useless to reclaim and too stubborn to sink. Its hull was marred by dents, missing rivets, and flaking metal that peeled like sunburnt skin. Barnacles had claimed its lower flanks. A broken crane hung over the top deck like the outstretched arm of a drowned giant.

But as the crew drew near, signs of life stirred. A soft light leaked from beneath the cargo doors—warm and golden. A figure emerged from the shadows, rifle in hand, scarf pulled over the lower half of his face. Another stepped into view across the dock, flanking them. Neither spoke. Jack raised both hands slowly. “We’re here to see Elara Voss,” he said, voice steady. “She received our message. We were told to come tonight.” A long pause followed. The wind picked up, carrying with it the faint sound of gulls and distant machinery. One of the sentries made a series of sharp knocks against the hull—coded, practiced. A moment later, a hidden hatch swung open near the ship’s belly, spilling light onto the dock. A different voice, feminine and clipped, called out from within.

“Bring them in. Eyes open.”

They were ushered through the hatch one by one. The moment they stepped inside, the illusion of ruin melted away. The interior of the ship was alive with motion, warmth, and structure—transformed into a makeshift fortress and sanctuary.

Wooden slats had been laid across rusting steel. Tarps and tapestries hung between exposed beams, turning empty spaces into communal rooms. The lower decks bustled with activity: children sleeping in bunkbeds made from cargo crates, old men playing dice near a potbelly stove, women grinding dried herbs in bowls made from salvaged rivets. A stew pot boiled somewhere down the corridor, thick with spice and fish oil. Lanterns swung from ropes overhead, some glass, some made from repurposed mining helmets. Even in the midst of squalor, there was a palpable sense of structure. Of hope.

Armed guards patrolled the walkways, many wearing patches or sashes in Skarrenfolk red and silver. Some bore old military tattoos from the homeland—tattoos of waves, serpents, and shattered ships. Their weapons were makeshift but deadly: repurposed bayonets, modified pistols, and cruel-looking cudgels bound with wire. They watched Jack’s crew closely but said nothing as they passed. Eventually, they reached a reinforced steel door near the aft of the ship. Two women in armor made from salvaged dock plating flanked the entrance. One gave a short nod and opened the hatch. Inside was a converted officer’s lounge, now transformed into a war room. A map of Doskvol stretched across a wide wooden table, its surface carved with routes, notes, and markers. Diagrams of the Old Port, the trade lines, and rumored smuggling lanes covered one wall. On another, a Skarrenfolk flag hung in silence—faded but defiant. The room smelled of wax, parchment, and salt.

And there she was. Elara Voss. She stood tall and still at the center of the room, like a carved statue that had decided to breathe. Her navy leather coat hung open just enough to show a high-collared tunic beneath, its buttons glinting in the lanternlight. Braided cords sat on her shoulders, red and silver—military colors from a country that no longer existed. Her steel-blue eyes met theirs as they entered, cool and commanding.

Jack gave a respectful nod. “Thank you for agreeing to see us.”

Elara didn’t return the gesture. “You’re the ones who sent word through the Black Market."

“We are,” Harleena said, stepping forward.

“You came here asking for something. Let’s get to it.”

Jack took a breath. “We want to enter the balloon race.”

One of Elara’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “You’re a little late to register.”

“We’re not looking for a fresh start,” Jack said. “We’re looking to race under Ulric Stoneborn’s banner. With your help.”

Now she blinked, just once. “You don’t know Ulric. And he doesn’t know you.”

“No,” Rabbit cut in, “but he will—if you vouch for us.”

Harleena stepped beside him, voice calm but sharp. “We’re not just trying to win a race. We want to turn this into something bigger.”

Elara folded her arms. “Go on.”

So they did. Jack explained the setup. The rich patrons who sponsor the event. The lack of rules once you’re airborne. The potential for sabotage. The massive flow of money behind closed doors. Harleena painted the larger picture—how the city council was moving to reopen the Old Port, and how such a move would devastate the Skarrenfolk’ control over illicit trade routes. Rabbit laid out the strategy: they’d race, fight dirty, and ensure Stoneborn’s victory. Then, once they reached the finish line—coincidentally located near the newly restored port—they’d rig their balloon to explode, causing destruction, chaos, and enough political embarrassment to stall any government initiative for months. All Elara had to do was make a call. A word to Ulric Stoneborn. A recommendation. And a bet.

Silence fell in the room as she processed. Her eyes wandered to the map, to the port, to the fragile web of alliances Doskvol barely held together. Then she turned back to them. “You know what you’re asking,” she said. “You want me to stake my name—my leverage—with Ulric. You want me to tell him that four strangers, fresh out of Crow’s Ward, are worth gambling on.”

“We’ll make it worth your while,” Jack said.

Elara’s voice dropped to a low murmur. “I don’t do this lightly.”

“Neither do we,” Harleena said. “But if you back us, we’ll make sure Stoneborn wins. And we’ll ensure the Old Port doesn’t.”

A long pause. Then Elara let out a slow, almost imperceptible sigh. She walked to the far side of the room and opened a small iron chest. From within, she removed a single silver token—an old Skarrenfolk betting coin, worth more than most smugglers made in a year. She placed it on the table and looked Jack squarely in the eye. “I’ll vouch for you,” she said. “I’ll send word to Ulric and tell him the new crew out of Crow’s Ward might be just the bastards he needs this year.”

Jack exhaled.

“But understand this,” she continued. “I’m placing a large wager on the Stoneborn. A very large wager. Public, visible. If you lose—if you humiliate him and, by extension, me—then you’ll wish you’d crashed in the sea.” Her words were steel wrapped in silk. A warning and a promise.

Jack nodded. “We’ll win. You have our word.”

She leaned forward slightly, eyes hard as stone. “Then make sure you do.” They shook hands—Jack’s calloused fingers meeting hers, strong and weathered. The deal was made. As they turned to leave the Refuge and stepped once more into the cold Doskvol fog, the crew walked not just as hopefuls—but as chosen. A spark had been lit. The skies awaited.

The morning light crept across the jagged skyline of Doskvol like a thief, slowly peeling back the darkness and casting gold onto the broken bones of the Lost District. What once might have been a thriving recreational ground—now little more than cracked concrete and overgrown weeds—had been transformed into the staging site for one of the city’s most secretive and dangerous events: the annual illegal balloon race. The air was thick with steam, smoke, and the low hum of pressurized gas tanks. Everything reeked of engine oil, sweat, and fried nerves. Balloon fabric snapped in the breeze like sails at war. Gangs and rogue factions worked in hushed chaos, tending to ropes, tanks, and ignition systems, moving in choreographed frenzy without drawing attention. There were no grandstands, no applause, no roaring crowds with drinks in hand. This was not a spectacle for the public. This was business for the underworld. As Jack, Harleena, Rabbits Foot, and Harry approached the clearing at the far end of the overgrown field, Harry stopped in his tracks and blinked. “Wait… where is everyone?”

Jack glanced over his shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“I mean… where are the people?” Harry gestured to the expanse around them, where only a few scattered figures loitered on the edges—men in long coats, women with note tablets, grim-faced runners with satchels and ledgers. “This is a damn sky race, right? Where’s the crowd? Where’s the betting tent? The sausage cart? The drunks shouting names and getting into fistfights?” Rabbit snorted. “This isn’t a street parade, Harry. These people don’t want witnesses.” Harleena’s eyes were already scanning the perimeter, noting lookout points, the carefully camouflaged snipers on rooftops, the flickers of lenses tracking movement from the abandoned towers flanking the field. “Every bet’s made through black market brokers,” she said. “Payouts too. All off-book. All underground. The only people here are the ones who are racing, fixing, or financing.” Harry let out a long, theatrical sigh. “I swear, sometimes Doskvol just doesn’t know how to throw a party.”

The balloon yard sprawled before them like a low-tech battlefield. Each vessel was massive in its own right, moored by thick cables and crewed by their own small entourages. Yet despite their similarities in form, each balloon reflected the philosophy and temperament of its creators. Closest to them was the Cyphers’ balloon—its golden metallic shell gleamed with an almost unnatural polish. Twin exhaust pipes jutted from its base, chuffing smoke in rhythmic pulses. The engineering was brutal and refined in equal measure, clearly hiding mechanisms that weren’t meant to be pretty, just deadly. A few spaces down floated the Gloam Sisters’ entry—jet black, smooth as ink, with a shifting, oily shimmer that made it difficult to stare at for long. Its mooring cables appeared thinner than the others, yet seemed to hum with faint static energy. No one stood near it. No one needed to. The air around it warned intruders away like a dog baring invisible teeth. Then came the bold crimson and copper-colored balloon of the Ember Circle. Intricate pipework wrapped around its envelope like veins, and their flaming eye emblem—emblazoned across its center—glared down with theatrical menace. They made no attempt to hide their identity. They wanted to be known, feared, admired. Lord Veylock’s balloon was nothing short of immaculate. Sleek and silver-gray, built like a noble’s hunting yacht. Elegant lines. Reinforced steel basket. Private guards stood at attention, dressed in long coats and polished boots. The vessel floated as if it had already won. Two unmarked balloons hovered farther off—one dull gray, the other a dark, scuffed bronze. These belonged to Bazso

Baz and the Pennwrights. Devoid of flair. Functional. Dangerous. Their purpose was not to win with style, but to win at all costs. Their presence felt like the quiet before an ambush.

And finally—off to one side, half-limp from an uneven mooring job—was the Stoneborn balloon.

It looked like a junkyard had exploded and reassembled itself out of sheer spite. Scrap metal riveted into irregular plates. Patches stitched over gaping holes in the fabric. Steam valves that hissed at unpredictable intervals. A chalk-drawn logo read “Victory is Violence” above a crude sketch of a spiked bat. It was impossible to tell if it was flying through engineering or pure rage.

Jack squinted. “That’s the one?”

“Yup,” Rabbit muttered. “Stoneborn pride.”

From behind the balloon came a clatter and the unmistakable sound of two children shouting over each other.

“You lit it wrong again, Cuzão! That’s why the pressure’s off!”

“You said clockwise! I did clockwise! Your dumb face is the problem!”

Two boys emerged from behind a smoking pipe system, tangled in wires and curses. One was short, jittery, wearing a cap so low over his face he could’ve passed for a shadow. The other strode like he owned the world, his tattered yellow football jersey hanging off his frame as he gestured wildly at a sparking connector.

“Get your fingers off my ignition box, Cuzão! Griselda's sensitive!”

Harleena tilted her head. “Griselda?”

“My revolver,” Dadinho announced proudly, not missing a beat. “She’s temperamental, but she’s loyal.”

“Gods help us,” Rabbit whispered under his breath.

Cuzão—twitchy and nervous—ducked behind a gas tank, glancing up only long enough to assess the newcomers before scribbling something in a worn notebook. His fingers fidgeted constantly, one hand tucked near the slingshot at his waist. “Who are they?” he asked without looking at anyone.

Dadinho narrowed his eyes and cracked a smirk. “The new guys from Crow’s Ward,” he said with a voice soaked in sarcasm and curiosity. “Come to join the big leagues, eh?”

Harleena stepped forward, her rifle slung behind her and eyes sharp. “We’re here to win. Preferably without catching fire.”

“Good luck with that,” Dadinho said, motioning to the Stoneborn balloon. “This thing hasn’t caught fire in a week. A new record.”

Despite the banter, Harleena couldn’t help but feel a strange warmth crawl up her spine. They were just kids—scarred and loud and half-feral—but they reminded her of people she’d once known. People who had nothing, and made weapons out of scraps.

Dadinho, still fascinated, leaned closer to her. “That rifle... that the one with the triple-chamber stabilizer? The one I heard took out three Imperial Polices with one burst last winter?”

“Possibly,” Harleena said. “You hear a lot of stories?”

“I collect them like ammo,” he said, eyes bright. “One day I’ll make a book.”

Cuzão snuck behind him and whispered, “You can’t write.”

“I’ll make Harry ghostwrite it,” Dadinho shot back.

Harry, who had been sulking about the lack of cheering fans, perked up. “Wait, I’m what now?”

Jack clapped his hands. “Alright. Enough flirting. We’ve got a balloon to patch and a race to rig.”

Harleena watched as Dadinho eagerly tossed aside a misaligned valve and began explaining his plan for upgrading the flame regulator—using parts from an old stove and a busted wristwatch. Cuzão, meanwhile, handed Rabbit a scrawled map of the race’s aerial path—entirely hand-drawn, likely stolen or remembered from some overheard briefing. Despite the rust, the arguing, and the odds, something about this ragtag team felt... right. They weren’t flying the prettiest balloon. But they just might be the most dangerous crew in the sky.

Harleena adjusted the strap of her rifle again as Jack started barking orders and Rabbit dove into technical talk with the boys. She took a few steps back from the growing chaos and let her eyes drift once more across the clearing. The sight of so many airships—balloons, if one wanted to call them that—waiting like caged beasts, each one heavy with secrets, metal, ambition, and spite... it stirred something inside her chest. Not excitement, not quite. Something colder. Sharper. A slow coiling awareness that whatever happened next, it would not be clean. This wasn’t a job. This was war in slow motion, dressed up in heat and air.

And yet—for all the madness of it—there was a rhythm to the moment. The way the wind tugged at the balloon fabric like impatient fingers. The glint of early sunlight on steel. The clipped tones of competing crews, murmured strategies floating through the air like smoke. Each crew moved with intention, with pressure. Every one of them had something to prove, something to lose.

Harleena's gaze flicked back to the Stoneborn balloon. She still couldn’t decide if it was charming or suicidal. The thing looked like it had been salvaged from five different scrapyards and sewn together during a riot. The hull was scorched in places. The ropes mismatched. Some of the piping looked... decorative? Improvised? It was hard to tell. It reeked of desperation. But that, in Doskvol, wasn’t always a weakness. Desperation meant you fought harder. The kids were still arguing—of course they were. Dadinho had climbed halfway up the fuel system, a wrench in his teeth and a coil of tubing draped around his neck like a scarf. He looked like a goblin gearing up for trench warfare.

“You have to press the valve twice before lighting it,” he was explaining, with the kind of authority that came only from blowing something up once and surviving. “Otherwise you get the fizz but no flame. Like your farting attempts at fire last week.” Cuzão, crouched under the basket and fiddling with a loose panel, didn’t even look up. “That was one time. And it was raining. And I had a head cold. You promised not to bring it up again.”

“I lie a lot,” Dadinho replied, tightening something with a snap. “You know that.” Harleena folded her arms, suppressing a grin. She wasn’t exactly sure when it had happened—but somewhere between the sarcasm, the half-rusted balloon parts, and the fearless lunacy of these kids, she had started to care. There was something deeply wrong about children being this comfortable around danger... but she also knew what it meant. These boys weren’t soft. They weren’t sheltered. They didn’t ask for the world to be fair, only for it to keep spinning long enough for them to steal another day. And that made them part of the crew. She knelt beside Cuzão as he

hammered something back into place. He flinched slightly at her proximity, like a stray dog expecting a kick. “You’ve been doing this long?” she asked softly.

He gave a hesitant nod. “Since Ulric came around. They didn’t have many hands. I’m small. I listen well.”

“You spy for him?” she asked, more curious than accusing. He looked her in the eye for the briefest second, then nodded again. “I know where people go. What they hide. I don’t tell unless it matters.” Harleena liked that. She respected quiet intelligence more than loud bravado. It was always the quiet ones who saw everything. “What about him?” she tilted her head toward Dadinho, who had now pulled a small pistol from his belt and was pretending to polish it with an oil rag. The thing looked like it had been crafted out of old kitchen parts and violence. “He talks too much,” Cuzão muttered.

“You trust him?” A pause. Then, quietly, “He’d take a bullet for me.” Harleena nodded. That was all she needed to hear. By now, Harry was double-checking the burner's ignition coil, muttering to himself about reverse enchantments and thermal flow. Rabbit stood with the map in hand, studying it like a tactician at war, one finger tracing flight paths and identifying possible ambushes. Jack, of course, was making a speech.

“You lot,” he said, gesturing at everyone in a wide circle — ”Us adults,You kids. I know we’re the underdogs. I know we’re flying a bucket of bolts strapped to a steam kettle. But I’ll tell you something—nobody here expects us to win. That’s our edge. Nobody watches the ghost in the crowd.” Harleena rolled her eyes. “Just don’t crash us into a church bell and I’ll call it a success.”

“Noted!” Jack grinned. “No church bells.” The hum of voices quieted as a sharp whistle pierced the air. The race organizer, now standing atop a tall crate in the center of the yard, raised a megaphone with one hand and a stopwatch with the other. “Racers!” he bellowed, his voice cutting through the haze like a gunshot. “Listen up!” Every crew snapped to attention. Harleena stood straighter, feeling the energy shift. This was it. No more repairs. No more jokes. Just sky, flame, and survival. The man continued. “You all know the rules. No firing weapons. No killing. This is a race, not a war zone.” Harleena caught the subtle reactions—smirks, shrugs, expressions of disbelief. They all knew it was a lie. Once in the air, anything went.

“There are five checkpoints across the city,” the organizer went on, tapping a chalkboard map beside him. “You must collect a flag bearing your crew’s emblem at each one. No flag, no win. First balloon to land at the Old Port with all their flags is the champion.”

“Gadgets?” someone from the Cyphers called out.

The organizer rolled his eyes. “Fine. Use what you want. Just don’t kill anyone. And if your contraption explodes and takes someone else down, I’ll make sure you don’t race next year. Hell, you won’t walk next year.” There were nods. Shrugs. Harleena kept her face unreadable, but her hand rested on the strap of her rifle, thumb brushing the safety. Just in case. She studied the other teams again. The Gloam Sisters stood in silence, their crew pale and blank-eyed, like they were already halfway to the spirit world. The Ember Circle exchanged confident glances, their leader tossing an apple into the air and catching it with a smirk. Lord Veylock’s people didn’t move at all—posture perfect, coats spotless. It was like they were waiting for a coronation, not a race.

And her crew? Patchwork clothes. Greasy fingers. Burned fabric. Makeshift maps. But they had grit. They had fire. And Harleena would bet on fire any day. The organizer raised his hand. “Get to your balloons. Take your positions.” The field erupted into motion. Harleena exhaled slowly. This was it. No turning back now. Whatever lay ahead—sabotage, betrayal, freak weather,

magical interference—they'd face it together. She climbed into the Stoneborn's balloon, felt the floor creak beneath her boots, and smiled grimly. It was time to fly.

"Ready?" the organiser's voice cut like a blade through the rising din of pressure valves and barking commands. Every crew froze for just a breath, hands on cables, eyes on sky.

"On my mark..."

Harleena tightened her grip on the side rail of the Stoneborn's basket, fingers slick with anticipation and sweat. Her heart pounded behind her ribs like it was trying to fly on its own.

"Get set..."

She sucked in a breath, long and slow, eyes flicking toward the sky, then across the field to the other balloons. Predators, every last one of them. Painted teeth. Metal claws. And they were about to rise.

"Go!"

The balloons lurched skyward like beasts breaking their chains. Veylock's sleek silver craft surged into the air like it had been summoned by the wind itself. The thing didn't so much fly as glide—smooth, measured, precise. It caught the first warm updraft like it was dancing with the morning light, its massive reinforced hull rising in quiet elegance. Harleena could practically smell the smugness from here. Just behind them, the Cyphers' golden balloon burst up with a mechanical roar. Steam hissed from its twin exhausts like a charging bull. The balloon didn't just rise—it launched. Its climb was vertical, violent, and fast, leaving a trail of gas discharge and awe-struck silence behind it. She watched as the Cyphers' engineer leaned over the railing and flipped a lever that caused panels to shift and click like clockwork armor.

"Not bad," Harleena muttered. "But let's see if they can keep that speed in the bends."

The Ember Circle, in their bold crimson monstrosity, came next. A fiery column of alchemical propulsion burst from the base of their basket, briefly casting orange light across the entire yard. Their balloon surged upward like a phoenix, engines roaring with theatrical flair. The eye emblazoned on their envelope seemed to *blink* as the balloon tilted forward aggressively. The crew onboard howled and raised fists like gladiators entering an arena. "Show-offs," she spat. But now—now it was their turn. Jack shouted something to the kids, and before Harleena could process it, the patched-together Stoneborn balloon jolted as the burners roared to life. Steam hissed from at least three unintended places, and the floor beneath her boots shuddered as the balloon strained against its rusted moorings. "Here we go!" Rabbit yelled.

The cables snapped loose with a whipcrack, and the balloon leapt into the sky—lurching and swinging like a drunk sailor. Harleena gritted her teeth and held tight as the hull groaned beneath them, rising in jagged starts and uneven thrusts. The patched canvas overhead billowed against the wind, flapping and snapping like an argument with the sky.

"Jack, altitude is unstable!" Harry called out, one hand on the flame regulator, the other already glowing with summoned fire. Jack didn't respond—his eyes were fixed on the Ember Circle's balloon just above them. The fiery ship roared through the air with brutal confidence. He narrowed his eyes. And then, without warning, Jack grabbed a tether rope from the side of the basket, tied it around the anchor hook, and hurled it upward with a grunt of effort—straight toward the Ember Circle's basket. "What are you—" Harleena started, but the rope snagged. For a moment, impossibly, the Stoneborn balloon latched onto the Circle's momentum. The strain of the tether pulled them forward, yanking their balloon into a sharper ascent. The entire basket

groaned and tilted dangerously, but the effect was immediate—they began to surge ahead, climbing and slicing upward in their wake.

Dadinho screamed with joy. “We’re hitchhiking firepower, baby!” Cuzão clung to the rail, eyes wide with panic. “We’re gonna die we’re gonna die we’re gonna die—!” Then came the snap. With a hiss and a puff of smoke, one of the Circle crew leaned over, tossed a small firebomb onto the tether, and incinerated it in an instant. The burned rope fell away like a dead vine, and they dropped slightly. “Nice try, Jack!” came a laughing voice from above, tinged with cruelty. Harleena saw a grinning figure saluting mockingly before vanishing behind the crest of their rising balloon. Jack yanked back the scorched remains of the tether, muttering curses. “We’ll get them next time.”

“Not if I get them first,” Harleena growled. Just then, the balloon rocked again—this time upward. Harry stood at the regulator, glowing with barely-contained energy. His hands pulsed with flame, channeling magical thrust into the burner. The effect was instantaneous—a fiery jet exploded beneath the balloon, sending them forward like a bullet from a rusted gun. The wind tore past them. The balloon groaned but held. Harleena felt the basket tilt, felt the pressure in her ears shift. They were gaining. “That’s it, Harry!” she yelled, eyes locked on the burning red balloon ahead. “Hold it!” Harry’s jaw was clenched, beads of sweat already running down his temples. “I can only do this so long! Burn rate’s insane!”

“You don’t have to,” she said, reaching into her pack and pulling out something small, spherical, and deadly. A grenade. It wasn’t exactly regulation. Not that anything about this race was. She stepped toward the edge of the basket, calculated the trajectory in her head, and watched the wind curl around the balloon’s arc. “Rabbit, stabilize the tilt!”

“On it!” He adjusted the ballast ropes. The deck stilled just enough. Harleena took a breath, waited for the right moment, and *threw*. The arc was clean. Perfect. The grenade soared through the air like a comet—right into the lip of the Ember Circle’s basket. The explosion was massive. A deafening *boom* echoed across the skies, followed by a burst of fire that spiraled into a fiery ring. One of the Circle crew screamed as they were flung from the basket, tumbling through the air before vanishing below the clouds—caught, hopefully, by a backup parachute, but it was impossible to see. The Circle’s balloon wobbled, lost speed, and dropped altitude in a chaotic lurch. “That’ll teach them!” Harleena shouted, adrenaline roaring in her blood. Her heart thumped in her ears like a war drum. Behind her, Harry flinched. “I hope they’re okay…”

“They’ll be fine,” Jack replied coldly, already steering them forward. “Or they won’t. Either way, they’re not in our way anymore.” Harleena didn’t answer. She just gripped the rail tighter, eyes narrowing as their balloon pushed forward, finally gaining open sky. The city sprawled out beneath them now, roofs and smoke stacks blurring into a grey, living sea. She could feel it now. The rush. The danger. The quiet thrill of being a predator above a city full of prey. This wasn’t about a race anymore. It was survival. Reputation. Power. And the sky had just become the most dangerous street in Doskvol.

The world turned upside down in less than a heartbeat as the Stoneborn balloon lurched forward, carrying Jack, Rabbit, Harry, Dadinho, Cuzão—and Harleena—with it. The roar of engines, the hiss of gas, and the distant howls from other crafts blurred into one single roaring pulse in her ears. The first checkpoint flag snapped into view like a blood-red beacon at the edge of the city. Veylock’s balloon glided there first. Harleena watched in cold admiration as their pristine craft lowered a small clawed hook and plucked the duplicate flag with savage grace. No fumbling. No hesitation. Just smooth, calculated motion. The enormous silver envelope tilted, signifying success before straightening again, power unreadable in every perfectly timed wrinkle of the fabric. Not far behind, the Cyphers swooped in—loose panels clicking like gears in formation as their technologists snapped the flag with mechanical

precision. Their balloon didn't soar; it *slid* across the sky with uncanny efficiency, and Harleena could almost hear the math models humming under their hull.

But then she saw movement at the Stoneborn side of the field—Dadinho and Cuzão, balancing on the exterior rigging of their patched balloon like wild daredevils. She inhaled sharply as they twisted and shifted, each motion a gamble over the yawning drop below. Cuzão reached out, nerves nearly cracking his voice, and grabbed the checkpoint flag. Dadinho helped steady him with one boot braced against the balloon's flange. When the metal clasp finally clicked into place, both boys grinned as wide as full-faced knives.

"We did it!" Cuzão screamed, gripping the flag like a trophy. The sound ricocheted from the basket above. Harleena couldn't help but let a small smile curve across her lips. "Good job, kid!" Jack yelled, voice ringing like a rallying horn. "Now get your ass back inside before you blow us all sky-high!" The boys scrambled back in, tumbling into the basket with wild relief—giddy, proud, and endangering everything in the name of victory. Harleena's heart clenched with something like pride, something warmer than fear but sharper than sentiment. She glanced upward at the flag snapping taut from the rigging. Checkpoint one: confirmed.

Then—Jack seized something like opportunity. He twisted his body, unsheathed a knife with neural quickness, and launched it into the air toward a nearby balloon's flag clasp. Harleena's breath froze. The projectile arced, spun—then missed cleanly, clattering harmlessly against the rebar. The flag remained where it was, undefeated. "Damn it!" Jack muttered. Near him, Rabbit's hand landed gently on Jack's shoulder. "We'll get another chance," he said quietly, knowing that opportunities steadied by nerves seldom repeated. Harleena didn't speak. She just watched the sky. Behind them, she glimpsed the Gloam Sisters maneuver—black curtains billowing overhead, unnatural static dancing across their envelope. With graceful intent, they fired off a tendriled blast of spirit magic like spectral tendrils shaped into force. The Ember Circle retaliated instantly—slick flicks of flame sprouted beneath their rigging, igniting thrust boosters designed for aggression, not elegance. An exchange of fire and dark energy pulsed between them midair. One of the Gloam Sisters hissed through tightening cords: "We'll get you next time!"

"Not if we burn you first!" the fiery-haired Circle leader snapped, sending another scrap of flame and heat cascading upward. Harleena felt her knuckles whiten around the rail. The sky was no longer a race. It was a battlefield. Then something else happened—a flick beyond her peripheral. The Pennwrights, recognizing Bazso Baz's balloon drifting near them, executed a surgical strike. A rope snaked out, they slipped into range, and the flag was gone in a second. They sailed forward triumphantly, laughter trailing like smoke. A harsh curse drifted up from Bazso's direction: "You thieves! We'll get it back!" The Pennwrights' reply was a knowing, satisfied chuckle that echoed even into the thinning atmosphere above the field. Harleena watched the horizon, mind racing. Each balloon ahead carried incentive, strategy, danger. Veylock's had momentum. Cyphers had efficiency. Flame had aggression. Bazso had malice. And behind them all, the Gloam Sisters pulsed with arcane unpredictability. Suddenly—Harry spoke. Quiet, focused. He grabbed a knife from the pack and hurled it toward the Cyphers' balloon with a flick of his wrist and a charge of magical energy. The tip hissed through the air, and Harleena watched it strike a pressure valve squarely. Instantly—a venting hiss and a dribble of gas—and then catastrophe. The Cyphers' balloon buckled, cannisters venting rapidly. Altitude dropped. Their envelope began to sag. Crew scrambled. Panic flickered in robotic eyes. The craft shuddered like a wounded beast, then slowed—no more sleek glide. They plummeted, only to recover horribly, staggered and unbalanced.

"Nice shot, Harry!" Jack yelled, almost thunderous. Harry nodded, eyes wide, cheeks flushed. "Just doing my part." Harleena saw the Cyphers falter. She saw the others banking away to avoid collision. She felt the moment pulse beneath her feet. Jack and Rabbit didn't hesitate. Jack leaned low over the rail and muttered something to Rabbit. Within seconds, they were

gliding close to the damaged craft. Rabbit darted along the side of the Cyphers' basket, meanings hidden behind his calm gaze. Harleena knew Rabbit was working the ritual—something blood-touched, arcane enough to spook even the most disciplined engineer. Jack took one slow breath and locked eyes with a hapless Cypher as the wind shook loose gadgets and wiring. He said one word—silent, deliberate—and the Cypher's eyes twitched, glaze darkening them. With the same numb precision, the man pressed a lever, disengaging vital control systems. The Cyphers' balloon began to tip. "Sorry, mate," Jack said quietly, voice flat. Then he pulled back the edge of his coat, throat crisply upright, posture calm. Rabbit gave him a nod so slight it might've gone unnoticed.

The Cyphers' balloon listed, then began to drop—not plummet—but with an unacceptable slowness. Their edge was gone. They wobbled, powerless. Harleena felt triumphant warmth—but not relief. She knew that what they'd done was clever and brutal and dangerously visible. *We're pushing every limit,* her chest warned. *Keep sharper.* Above them, the Ember Circle surged forward—seizing the gap left by the Cyphers' crash. Their crimson envelope heeled forward, picking speed like flame feeding on wind. Their leader's voice drifted upward: "Time to show them who's boss!" Harleena watched the two balloons converge: the Stoneborn/Crows patchwork rocket and the Circle's scorched red beast. They hovered neck and neck, flags snapping in the empty breeze, streams of gas and magic crackling between them. Dadinho leaned out again—greedy for another flag—while Cuzão scribbled notes in his book, scribbling diagrams in panic and admiration. Their eyes were alight. And then—*

A flaming bottle arced out. Harleena's heart nearly stopped. It landed with a puff of flame against their balloon's patched hull, burning through seams and spraying sparks. "Fire! Fire!" Harleena screamed. She snapped into action—rag under arm, water flask in hand, adrenaline roaring—but the heat burned upward fast. Flame clawed through rope and canvas. Jack barked, voice tight and clear: "Keep it together! We can't let them overtake us!" The sky blurred. The ropes hissed. Dadinho and Cuzão scrambled behind crates in the basket. Harry looked terrified—magic trembling around his hands.— Veylock's balloon shone far ahead, silent and swift. The lead balloonist's voice crackled over a speaking-tube: "Steady, everyone. We're almost there." Harleena spat a curse at the Circle's direction. The flame flared badly. She flung water and smothered embers. Every second counted. Every breath burned until— Grim glare across the sky. She locked her gaze on the City's silhouette: the Old Port, the finish line. And she realized—it was not yet over.

Harleena hovered on the edge of the Stoneborn basket, watching ribbons of flame and steel-red flags dissolve behind them as the second checkpoint vanished into the pastel haze beneath them. The first checkpoint had been a trial—this one was an inferno. From her vantage, Veylock's balloon streaked past, flag clipped in place with deadly efficiency. A tapestry of silver sails and manners marched through the sky as Harleena recalibrated her tension: they were behind, but not defeated. Just as she exhaled, the Ember Circle passed close enough to feel the heat off their boosters as they claimed their second flag in a blaze of flamboyant defiance. Then, like a silent wave, Stoneborn struck. Harry's voice—filled with triumph—shattered the sky:

"We got it!"

Harleena turned to see him. The flag snapped taut from their rigging; brass caught the dawn. Jack's rare grin split his face. For a second, no heat, no wind—just the hum of possibility. The third checkpoint loomed ahead: a sliver of coral breeze and false calm. She braced, tracking Veylock's ship again. Realizing her bottom lip trembled slightly, she bit it into place, refusing to flinch at the sky anymore. Harry stepped toward the edge, tether rope unraveled like sibilant silk. Harleena's breath caught as he tossed it upward with precision at the unsuspecting Veylock envelope. When it snagged, the entire field erupted in raw disbelief. Jack leaped. Rabbit mirrored him with calm terror. They crouched low, balancing weight, carving across the strain.

Harleena leaned forward, watching their ankles grip cables like knife-thin vines. “Be careful!” she cried, but they were already gone—sliding toward enemy lines, hearts lit with madness. Veylock’s crew gasped. One of them lurched forward, fist clenched. The wind picked up as they tangled midair, Stoneborn and Veylock locked in violent ballet with no ground beneath them. Harleena’s world tattered. The sacred sky became a war zone.

Below, on a shifting balcony, a chestnut vendor stepped back out of the shade, mouth half-open. “What’s happening up there?” The boy near him didn’t answer. They both just watched. Harleena’s mind thundered. She cursed herself for a moment’s hesitation that let them near—but then, Jack's voice cut through the confusion: “I’m not going anywhere!”

Each syllable clipped cold. The rope strained. She saw a swing come for him—hard and precise—but he ducked, a flash of grey jacket, then seized control of the tether. One hand anchored him; the other pushed Rabbit back past the graded basket lip. Below, the crowd gasped. She gripped the basket rail, breath shaking, but her pulse steadied. It was insane—self-destructive—but every faction had already opted for death in the sky. What was one more recklessness if it claimed glory? Jack’s poker-face cracked into a grin. She let herself believe, just for a half breathe, that they could win. A sudden blur: Rabbit and Jack pivoting back toward their ship like predators launching a strike. And just then, Jack’s quiet incantation reached them: Five minds bled their memories into the sky, leaving confusion where coordination once lived. She saw vacant eyes blink around them before sagging into panic. Loosened levers misaligned. Crew staggered as if gravity had regained purchase. No order remained.

Veylock’s ship tilted, moments from stall. Harleena’s heart pounded lightning. She saw Jack’s face again: icy calm, predator’s precision. Rabbit’s fingers danced across the engine panels, pulling wires, disarming vanes. Metal hissed. Valves clicked. She watched the descent begin. She hadn’t helped. But she’d backed him. Veylock’s envelope began to falter—heavier on one side, edges limping in their ascent. Stoneborn confidence flooded their basket and supported their own climb forward. From the corner of her eye, she saw Ember Circle speeding—snatching flags, vaulting ahead. Dadinho hurled a grappling hook at Circle’s blazing hull. The winch caught solid—boom. Cuzão swung out next, rope whined as it attached to Veylock’s failing envelope. Both balloons collided, dance of steel. The extra burden pitched them sideways. Harleena didn’t hesitate. She shoved forward, directing Harry to recalibrate burners, explain measurements of altitude buffers to Dadinho. Every breath cut thin.

Then Cuzão slipped. Gravity took him. For a heartbeat, Harleena thought her heart stopped. Rope burned in her fingers. Dadinho lunged, harpoon still grasped. “No,” Rabbit gasped. No. Not again. But Cuzão vanished downward through the mist. She didn’t look away. The sky swallowed him. Jack’s hand closed over her elbow, white-knuckled: “This path...it’s ours,” he said. “We keep going.” She exhaled slow. “Then let’s finish this.”

The wind shrieked past Harleena’s ears as she clung to the edge of the Stoneborn’s battered balloon basket, her knuckles bloodless against the rust-caked railing. Her eyes were fixed on the plume of smoke spiraling beneath them, the mist parting just long enough to reveal a small figure sprawled across a fractured roof tile. Cuzão. He had fallen. She didn’t breathe. She couldn’t. But—miraculously—he moved. The drop hadn’t been far. Maybe three stories. Maybe four. His leg bent at an angle that made her stomach twist, but he raised a hand in defiance. Alive. Injured, but alive. She exhaled, then immediately shouted over the wind: “He’s down! He’s alive!” As if summoned by her voice, a small, swift team emerged from the shrouded alleyways below. Skarrenfolk refugees in worn jackets and mismatched boots—ragged, quiet, efficient. Jack’s contingency plan. He always had one. Harleena had doubted him once for it. Never again.

She watched as they moved like shadows, scooping up the boy with gentleness at odds with their scarred hands and hard eyes. A stretcher appeared from nowhere. One of the women pressed a glowing charm to Cuzão's chest—he stopped moaning. His breathing slowed. Stabilized. Jack leaned over the basket beside her, eyes locked on the retreating rescue party as they vanished into the ruins. "You're going to be okay," he whispered, half to himself, half to the boy too far away to hear. Harleena glanced sideways at him, the line of his jaw tight, blood still spattered lightly across one cheek. His eyes were endless and empty. She knew that look. That was guilt. That was control just barely holding back collapse. "Don't fall apart now," she muttered under her breath, not at Jack, but to herself. "There's still a race." And they were still in it. The Stoneborn balloon surged forward, steam wheezing from the patched side-valves as Rabbit rerouted pressure through the auxiliary burner ring. Dadinho was still clinging to the rear anchor, one leg hooked in the twisted netting, shouting back telemetry data like a half-mad hawk. His eyes burned. His hands bled. But he grinned like a devil. Harleena grabbed the edge of the balloon's rotating mount and steadied herself, squinting past smoke and windburn. Behind them, the Gloam Sisters were creeping forward again—silent, ominous, their balloon drawn by tethers of spectral wind and dead things with too many eyes. Ahead, the Cyphers were climbing altitude rapidly, their engine-core glowing orange like an awakening leviathan. She could feel the pressure wave of their advance—tech, magic, madness—whatever it was, it was coming for them.

But the Crows and the Stoneborn had a secret weapon of their own. Harry stood in the middle of the basket, arms spread wide, mouth moving in quiet cadence. His eyes glowed faintly. A faint shimmer crackled above them, and one of the charmed flying monkeys—still loyal, still under his control—darted forward like a streak of smoke and shadow. It twisted midair, claws slicing through wind, and plucked the final flag from its rig. Harleena watched it loop once, twice, and dive back to them with the prize in hand. She grinned, teeth sharp against the cold. "All our flags," Harry announced as the monkey dropped the flag into his waiting hand. "We've got them all." The basket erupted in cheers. Dadinho howled. Rabbit whooped. Even Jack let out a rare, strained laugh. "We've got this," Harry added, the flag clutched to his chest like a sacred relic. Harleena's heart pounded. Victory was no longer a dream—it was tangible, breathing, singing in her chest like a bird begging to escape. "Burn altitude!" she barked. "Bring her down to the port! Full speed!" Rabbit twisted knobs. The balloon groaned. Below them, the charred remains of the Old Port spread out like a cratered battlefield. Crumbling docks. Empty warehouses. Fog curling around dead cranes and rusted rail lines. The finish line.

They dove. But too fast. Harleena's stomach shot into her throat as the balloon began to descend at a dangerous angle, the patchwork engine shrieking in protest. "Too fast!" Harry yelled. "Flame stabilizers failing!" Rabbit confirmed. Jack looked ahead. "Don't stop. We're going through." Then, just as the balloon cleared the final row of buildings— Impact. The basket slammed into a stone platform, skidded, bounced, and struck a wall with a crunch that ripped the front railing off entirely. Fire erupted from beneath the primary burner. Then a second explosion—smaller, sharper—ignited a chain reaction along the base of the envelope. Flames licked skyward. Harleena was already moving. "Out! Out! Now!" Sparks rained down as Rabbit helped Dadinho off the rig. Jack staggered into Harry, both of them coughing. Harleena turned once—just once—to see the balloon go up in a roar of fire. The sky turned red. And in that moment, Rabbit smiled. "Actually," he said, voice casual despite the chaos, "it was my plan. I sabotaged our own balloon to explode right now." Harleena froze mid-step. "You what?"

"Insurance," Rabbit said, already pulling her forward. "The port's useless now. The whole deal's done. Elara will be happy."

“You blew up our balloon,” she said, half in awe, half in horror.

“And won the race,” he added. She didn’t respond. There wasn’t time. Smoke towered. Sirens wailed in the far distance. Then— A scream. Not of pain, but of betrayal. Harleena spun around. Dadinho stood frozen, one hand extended, eyes wide. Jack’s hand was outstretched toward him—magic crackling faintly at his fingertips. “I’m sorry,” Jack said, voice taut. “I can’t let you remember this.” A faint glow flared on Dadinho’s hand. A symbol—wrought in careful ink and magic—shone beneath his skin like a ward come to life. His entire body tensed. “You’re trying to erase me,” Dadinho whispered. “No,” Jack said. “Not you. Just today.” But it was too late. The fear snapped something inside the boy. With a cry, Dadinho lunged forward and drove a knife into Jack’s side. The sound was sickening. A wet, crunching tear. Harleena’s lungs collapsed. She saw Jack’s eyes widen, his breath catch, and blood bloom across his ribs. “Jack!” she screamed. Jack staggered, falling against a collapsed beam. “Wait—wait, Dadinho, I wasn’t—!” But the boy was already running. Rabbit gave chase immediately, boots skidding across ash-covered planks. “Dadinho! Stop! He didn’t mean to—!” Harleena moved to follow, but Jack’s hand caught her wrist. “Let him go,” he whispered, pain warping his voice. “He needs space. That’s on me.” Harleena looked down at him, teeth clenched. The firelight made him look older. More tired. Human.

“You idiot,” she said. “You brilliant, reckless idiot.” Despite everything—despite the bleeding, the betrayal, the smoke and ruin—Jack smiled. The sirens grew louder. Distant shouts echoed across the port. The Stoneborn had won. But their alliance with the Crows was already splintering—held together by ash and silence. Harleena sat beside Jack as Rabbit returned, alone, empty-handed. No one spoke.

The race was over.

Ulric Stoneborn sat on the edge of a broken shipping crate, the scent of salt, scorched wood, and wet rust curling around him like a chain. The port was still smoldering. Somewhere in the cracked distance, a half-melted crane groaned in the sea wind like a dying animal. The once-silent ruins of the Old Port—long left to rot by the city’s bureaucracy—now smoldered with fresh wounds. Wounds the Crows had made. He watched embers float in the dusk air, drifting like fireflies, and chewed the inside of his cheek. A cold weight settled in his gut—not regret, not quite—but the undeniable pressure of something big beginning. He pulled his jacket tighter against the wind, scanning the wreckage of Doskvol’s past. “They really did it,” he muttered.

Dadinho stood a few feet away, arms crossed, watching the Skarrenfolk rescue crews carry away medical crates and debris. Cuzao was resting nearby on a pile of salvaged canvas, his arm in a sling, face pale but still smirking like he’d just cheated death—which he had. “The Crows,” Dadinho said flatly. “They didn’t just help us win. They made sure nobody else could even show up to the party.” Ulric didn’t answer right away. His storm-blue eyes tracked the burned-out remains of a barge that had collapsed into the bay, taking three docks with it. The government had been trying to get this place back in working order for months—maybe years. There were talks about new trade routes, Blackcloaks patrolling again, a ribbon-cutting ceremony with officials and Espiritas delegates. But the Crows? They’d lit a match and turned all of that into ash. Not for glory. Not even for coin. But because Elara Voss had asked them to. Because some movements are quieter than war and louder than any declaration.

“Those bastards pulled off a miracle,” Cuzao said, voice hoarse, but laced with wonder. “I mean, they actually burned it down without anyone knowing it was them.”

“Yeah,” Ulric muttered. “That’s what scares me.”

He stood slowly, every bone aching from the race, but his mind still sharp. His coat whipped in the wind as he stepped toward the edge of the pier, staring out across the black water where the burned iron frames of the old shipping scaffolds jutted like broken teeth. “The Old Port wasn’t the heart of the city,” Ulric began, thinking aloud. “It was dead. Forgotten. A half-rotted lung they were trying to bring back with wires and pipe dreams.” Dadinho nodded, understanding. “But if they’d pulled it off, they’d own a direct line to the docks. Clean trade. Dirty trade. The whole flow of goods.”

“Exactly,” Ulric said. “Elara knew that. So did the Crows. They weren’t just helping us win the race—they were reshaping the map.” And they had done it without raising suspicion. No one was coming for the Crows. No Imperial reports pointed their way. No rival factions were blaming them for the fire. To the city, it looked like a tragic, if explosive, accident during the race. The chaos of floating bombs, shattered gas lines, and sabotage all perfectly disguised as part of the mayhem.

But Ulric knew better. He’d heard about the way Jack looked at Dadinho before the memory trick. The way Harleena's voice cracked when she ordered the team to hold position while the port exploded beneath them. “They were never playing for a trophy,” he said under his breath. “They were playing for control.” Dadinho glanced at him, uneasy. “You think they’ll turn on us next?”

“No,” Ulric said slowly. “But I don’t think they’ll bleed for us again either. They’re not allies. Not enemies. Something else.”

“Wild cards,” Cuzao offered.

“Exactly,” Ulric said.

A silence settled over the three of them, filled only by the distant creak of boats and the hiss of extinguishing flames. Behind them, Skarrenfolk workers were already sealing off the rubble with tarpaulins and setting up sentry posts. This port would stay dead. And in its place, the Skarrenfolk would rise—smuggling, trading, and rerouting the city’s pulse through backdoor channels and makeshift harbors they now controlled. And the Stoneborn? They had won the race, but not alone. Their future victories would depend on whether they could match the vision—and the ruthlessness—of the Crows.

“Ulric,” Dadinho asked suddenly. “If they asked us to back them up again… would you?” Ulric didn’t answer right away. He let the question hang, rolling it around in his skull like a marble in a jar. “I’d fight beside them,” he said finally. “But I wouldn’t ever turn my back on them.” Dadinho swallowed hard. Cuzao nodded with grim respect. “We keep our eyes open,” Ulric added, pulling the Stoneborn Blade from its sheath and inspecting the edge. “We watch the tides. Doskvol’s changing. And anyone not changing with it…” He let the sentence die in the smoke.

Because they all knew how it ended.

Chapter 4: A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey

The quiet felt wrong.

Not the kind of quiet that was peaceful, but the kind that felt like the city was holding its breath, waiting to decide whether to cheer for you or put a knife in your back. Rabbit sat at the kitchen table, the same scarred oak slab they'd been using as a war council since they claimed this half-rotten house. Sunlight slanted through the broken blinds in pale, dust-heavy beams, falling across a pile of burner maps, a chipped mug of cold tea, and his half-finished notes on the race. Outside, Doskvol's damp air clung to the glass, blurring the alley beyond. Inside, the silence was so complete he could hear the slow tick of the cheap wall clock—another thing they'd salvaged from a Imperial Police eviction. It had been—what?—two, maybe three days since the race. His ribs still ached from the jostling of the balloon basket and the hard landings. The others had their own bruises, burns, and scrapes, but it wasn't the physical hurts that stuck with him. It was the look in people's eyes now. The way faces turned just slightly in the street. Not in open recognition—no, not yet—but with the weight of a new calculation. Jack leaned back in a chair across the room, boots kicked up on a crate, grinning like a man who'd just won the Emperor's personal lottery. "They're calling us the *new guys from Crow's Ward*," he said again, for what had to be the third time that morning. "I like it. Got a ring to it. Feels… permanent."

Harry, who had been poking through the pantry in search of biscuits they didn't have, turned and nodded. "Yeah, give it a week. I'm betting it shortens to just 'the Crows.' People love easy names." His tone carried the same bright excitement he'd had during the race—like the whole thing had been a game he couldn't wait to play again. "Think they'll hold another one of those races soon?"

"Not if the old port's still smoking," Rabbit murmured. He didn't look up from the maps. Harry didn't seem to catch the implication. Jack did, but he just smirked and said nothing. That was Jack for you—keep the cards close, but make sure people see you holding them. The moment broke when a knock came at the front door. Not a friendly one. Sharp, fast—businesslike. Rabbit exchanged a glance with Jack, and Jack's grin faded just a fraction. He got up, slid the latch, and opened the door to reveal a boy in a coal-gray coat—couldn't have been more than sixteen—holding a small, battered satchel. The kid's eyes darted over Rabbit, Jack, then to the rest of the house like he was cataloguing exits. "From the race," the boy said flatly, offering the satchel. "Payment." Then, before Rabbit could take it, he added: "And a word from my employer—stay sharp. Eyes are on you."

Rabbit took the satchel. "Your employer's name?" The boy's expression didn't change. "Doesn't matter." And just like that, he was gone—boots splashing through the puddles outside, vanishing into the drizzle.

Harry leaned over Jack's shoulder as Rabbit opened the satchel. Inside, wrapped in waxed cloth, was a neat stack of silver and a folded scrap of paper. The paper bore no signature, just a single line in careful script:

You were impressive. We'll be in touch.

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Friendly."

"Calculated," Rabbit corrected. He tucked the paper into his jacket. The silver stayed on the table, glinting in the dim light. Later that afternoon, the whispers began. A scrap dealer passing by muttered something about "those Crow's Ward lads" to a customer. A pair of dockhands

outside the tavern tilted their heads in the Crows' direction before quickly looking away. The city had taken note. Rabbit felt the weight of it like a storm building at sea—still far enough not to see the lightning, but close enough that the wind had changed. By evening, another knock came. This one softer, slower, but with purpose. On the doorstep stood a thin, silent man in a dark overcoat, carrying a long, flat box. He didn't give his name—just handed over the box with a slight bow and left without a word. Inside the box was a sealed letter on cream parchment, stamped with a sigil Rabbit recognized immediately: Elara Voss. He broke the seal carefully. The letter was short, elegantly written, and left no room for misinterpretation: *The friends of the Skarrenfolk are friends of mine. Opportunities will come. Be ready.* At the bottom, in smaller script: *Burn this.*

Rabbit read it twice, then lit it in the small tin dish they used for burning evidence. The parchment curled and blackened, the ink blistering in the flames. Jack watched from the table. "That means Veylock," he said, not a question. "Most likely," Rabbit replied. He kept his tone neutral, but inside, the gears were turning fast. This wasn't just recognition anymore—this was integration. They were being invited into games where the stakes were higher than they'd played before. And in Doskvol, invitations like that always came with a price. Rabbit sat back, listening to the creak of the house as the fire in the dish died. The quiet had changed again. No longer just wrong—now it felt like the pause before a door opened.

The smoke from Elara's letter still lingered in the room, clinging stubbornly to the air like the memory of a promise that couldn't be unmade. The thin curl of grey drifted up toward the cracked ceiling before vanishing into the shadows, leaving behind only that faint smell of singed parchment and sealing wax. Rabbit leaned forward in his chair, elbows resting on the scarred table, fingers laced loosely as he watched the last thread of smoke dissolve.

"While we're on the subject of… people showing interest," he began, his voice steady but carrying that careful weight he always used when the conversation was about to turn serious. "I didn't mention this before because I wasn't sure it mattered at the time. But—two nights ago, I was at The Shadows' Den."

The name alone pulled the others' attention. The Shadows' Den was their usual haunt—a low-lit tavern tucked into a crooked alley two districts over. A little out of the way, yes, but the kind of place where the patrons kept to themselves, the barkeep knew when to turn a blind eye, and the only trouble came if you went looking for it. It smelled of old wood and spilt liquor, the air heavy with the soft hum of quiet conversations and the lazy pluck of a single-string fiddle. Rabbit went on. "I was nursing a pint in the back corner, minding my own business, when this man comes up—Adrian. Said he works for Lannic Morrow." Jack's head snapped up, one brow arched. "Not that Xavier fellow I crossed paths with before?"

"No," Rabbit said, shaking his head slowly. "Different man entirely. Adrian had… that Cypher polish. The kind where every word feels measured, and every pause is calculated. Calm, polite, but the kind of polite that makes you wonder what's hidden underneath. You could feel the gears turning in his head the entire time." Jack leaned back in his chair, that familiar half-smirk tugging at his lips. "Maybe that's their thing. Whisper in your ear at a bar, leave you walking home wondering if you just made a friend or signed your life away." Harry, who had been perched on the edge of an overturned crate, perked up immediately. "We should come up with our own thing, then. Something cool. Like… we send a crow feather with a message tied to it, or—oh, I've got it—we drop a coin with our mark into someone's pocket. So when they find it, they know they've been… CROW'D." He spread his hands wide as if unveiling a grand trick.

Harleena let out a short, sharp breath through her nose—somewhere between a laugh and a scoff. Her eyes, dark and steady, fixed on Harry with the kind of focus that could strip paint off a wall. "This isn't a card trick, Harry. Every time one of these groups comes sniffing around, it's not

because they think we're charming—it's because they think we're useful. And when we stop being useful, we become disposable. Remember that before you start branding us like a theatre troupe."

Harry's grin faltered, though not entirely. "I was just saying—"

"You were just forgetting," Harleena cut him off, her voice firm but quiet enough to make him lean forward to hear it. "Every one of these crews plays for keeps. You want a calling card? Fine. Just know it might end up tied to your toe in the morgue." The words hung in the air like a storm cloud. Jack's smirk thinned, Harry dropped his gaze to the crate under him, and for a moment the only sound in the room was the faint creak of the wind against the shutters. Rabbit let the silence stretch, giving it weight before speaking again. "Point is—Adrian didn't waste words. He just told me Lannic would be in touch, then walked out. No details. No promises. Which, if you know the Cyphers, means whatever's coming isn't going to be simple." Jack tilted his head, thoughtful. "The Cyphers are famously picky. If Lannic's reaching out to us, either we're the only fools desperate enough to take the job… or the job's bad enough nobody else wants it."

"That's my thinking exactly," Rabbit replied. He leaned back, folding his arms. "They don't ask for help unless the risks are sky-high. And even then, they don't hand out invitations lightly. If we're getting one, it's because they've decided they can use us." Harry's voice broke the stillness again, quieter this time. "And… we're taking it?" Rabbit didn't answer right away. He let his gaze wander to the blackened corner of the table where Elara's letter had burned moments ago. "We hear him out," he said finally. "But we walk in with our eyes open." Right on cue, there was a knock at the front door—measured, deliberate, nothing like the hurried raps of a messenger in a rush. Jack rose, moving with that casual looseness that always looked like laziness until you noticed how ready his stance was. When he opened the door, a tall man stood framed against the drizzle outside. His coat was dark and perfectly tailored, the cut sharp enough to mark him as someone who moved in higher circles. His posture was straight, almost military, and his expression was as blank as a locked vault door.

"Message from Lannic Morrow," the man said simply, offering a sealed envelope. He didn't wait for thanks, questions, or acknowledgment—just turned and walked back into the mist, his boots whispering against the wet cobblestones until the sound was swallowed by the rain. Jack shut the door, tossing the envelope onto the table. Rabbit broke the seal, unfolding the thick, cream-colored paper inside. The handwriting was precise, almost mechanical, each letter perfectly spaced:

Mr. Morrow requests your presence for a matter of significant urgency. Your recent performance has suggested you may be… suitable.
Midnight tomorrow. Location enclosed.

No signature. No flourish. Just coordinates and a time. Rabbit read it twice before setting it down where the others could see. Harleena's jaw tightened as her eyes scanned the page. Jack's smirk returned, though there was something sharper behind it now. Harry's gaze flicked between the three of them, curiosity and unease warring in his expression. Rabbit leaned back in his chair again, the faint scent of rain mixing with the ghost of burned parchment. "Well," he said, almost to himself, "looks like we just got our invitation to the big table. Question is—what's the bill going to be?"

Beneath the shopfront of Lannic Morrow's modest-looking tech emporium, in a low-ceilinged chamber lit by the thin, cold glow of electroplasmic lanterns, the air was taut with purpose. A wide worktable dominated the center of the room, its surface littered with maps, coded messages, and half-finished mechanical devices. Lannic stood at the head of the table, his long coat drawn tightly around him, the silver fittings at his cuffs catching the pale light. His gaze moved steadily between the three men seated before him—Arthur Xavier, Silas Thorn, and Adrian Blackwood. "Gentlemen," Lannic began, voice steady and deliberate, the cadence of a man who expected to be listened to, "thank you for joining me on such short notice. As you are aware, we have an urgent task at hand—one that requires the utmost caution and precision. Our prototype needs to be transported safely across town, and given the events of our previous attempt, we cannot afford any mistakes." Arthur leaned forward, his arms resting lightly on the edge of the table. "Understood, Lannic," he said. "We'll make sure this time goes smoothly. What's the plan?"

"Our intelligence," Lannic replied, "suggests that the Ember Circle is aware of our intentions and may attempt to intercept the convoy again. That is why I have called upon each of you. Your loyalty and expertise are indispensable in ensuring the success of this operation." Silas Thorn's voice cut through with the sharp confidence of a man who preferred action over talk. "The Ember Circle? They won't catch us off guard this time. I'll have eyes on every shadow before they even know we're there." Lannic gave a faint nod, the ghost of approval in his expression. "Good to hear, Silas. We need your vigilance now more than ever." His attention shifted to the silver-streaked figure lounging slightly in his chair. "Adrian, I'm counting on you to coordinate the logistics and ensure our routes are secure. We can't afford any surprises." Adrian Blackwood's lips curved in that familiar, knowing smile, his tone smooth as velvet and just as dangerous. "Consider it done, Lannic. I'll have our defenses and contingencies in place. We won't give the Circle an inch to exploit."

"And me?" Arthur asked, though his tone suggested he already knew where this was headed. "You," Lannic said, "will be at the protection of the escort team, keeping our convoy safe. Your experience and resourcefulness will be invaluable in navigating any obstacles we encounter." Arthur gave a curt nod. "I won't let you down, Lannic. We'll get this prototype where it needs to go, no matter what."

"That's what I like to hear," Lannic replied, his tone sharpening slightly. "Remember—this mission hinges on our unity and resolve. We will show the Ember Circle that the Cyphers are not to be trifled with." He paused, scanning their faces before continuing. "There's one more crucial detail. We will not be alone in this endeavor. I've enlisted the help of a crew specifically trained in transporting delicate cargo across the city. They may be new to us, but they have shown remarkable resilience and skill." Silas arched an eyebrow. "New blood, eh? Well, as long as they can keep up, I suppose we'll manage."

"Indeed," Lannic said. "Additionally, I've secured the services of a renowned bounty hunter to join our ranks. Conrad Rian—better known as Constant—has agreed to lend his expertise. He's an old friend and has proven himself time and again in the field." Adrian leaned back slightly, interest sparking in his eyes. "Constant? I've heard of him. If anyone can watch our backs, it's him."

"Precisely," Lannic said. "Arthur, your primary responsibility will be to shadow the transport crew and the convoy. You'll act as our guardian—intervening should any threats arise, staying unseen until you are needed." Arthur's answer came without hesitation. "Consider it done. They won't even know I'm there until the moment demands it." Lannic's attention shifted again. "Adrian, your role remains crucial. You'll be scouting ahead of the convoy, identifying traps, choke points, or ambush sites before we walk into them. Your warnings will be our first line of defense."

“Understood,” Adrian said. “I’ll make sure the path is clear.” Silas leaned forward slightly, his voice lower but no less direct. “Lannic, who exactly are these new crew members? You say they’re resilient, but I’d like to know what kind of people we’ll be trusting with this.” Lannic folded his hands behind his back. “They are a group I’ve dealt with before, albeit on smaller jobs. They’re relatively new to the city’s wider stage—based out of the southeastern stretch of Crow’s Ward.” Adrian’s brows lifted, his tone carrying an edge of curiosity. “Southeastern Crow’s Ward? That’s the old turf of the Royal Gang. You’re telling me these new players are setting up shop there?”

“Indeed,” Lannic confirmed. “They’ve taken over abandoned Royal territory. A bold move, to be sure.”

“Bold,” Adrian murmured, “or reckless. That’s a dangerous patch of ground to claim.”

“It is,” Lannic admitted. “But they’ve proven themselves capable in the work I’ve given them so far.”

Arthur cut in. “What should we expect from them? Are they reliable?”

“Their apparent leader, Jack, is a Slide—cunning, manipulative, with a talent for getting what he wants. Be cautious. He has a reputation for tampering with memories. That is a skill you underestimate at your peril.”

Arthur didn’t let his expression shift, though a thought flickered across his mind. *Jack… could these be those new guys from Crow’s Ward?*

Lannic’s voice continued, firm. “Keep your wits about you. They may be assets to us, but they are also potential liabilities. We tread carefully.”

Silas inclined his head. “Understood. We’ll be on our guard.”

Adrian’s smile thinned. “I’ll keep a close eye on them. Doesn’t mean I’ll trust them.”

Arthur gave a small, silent nod. “Agreed. Let’s just hope this doesn’t come back to bite us.”

Lannic’s gaze swept over them. “Now—the rest of the crew. There’s Rabbit's Foot, a quiet one, elusive. Luck seems to favor him, but more than that, he’s a strategist. The diversion plan we’re using for this convoy? His idea. And I must admit—it’s rather brilliant.”

Arthur’s lips twitched in acknowledgment. “Impressive. And the others?”

“The wizard and the hound,” Lannic said. “The wizard is young, untested, but with a spark worth watching. The hound… she’s something else entirely. Stern, disciplined, and dangerous. Even her own crew seem to keep a careful distance.”

“Sounds like trouble if crossed,” Adrian said.

“Indeed,” Lannic replied. “But trouble of the useful kind—provided her focus stays where it belongs.”

Silas glanced at the table. “Have they had contact with the prototype yet?”

“No,” Lannic said firmly. “And I intend to keep it that way until absolutely necessary. The less they know, the better for everyone.”

Arthur met his gaze. “Agreed. We’ll keep watch and ensure its safety.”

“Good,” Lannic said, his voice final. “We cannot afford slip-ups. This mission’s success will determine more than you realize.”

The knock I gave the door was firm, deliberate—enough to be heard over the quiet hum of whatever was going on inside, but not so loud as to make it seem like we were barging in. Jack shifted his weight next to me, his coat collar turned up like he was trying to look cooler than usual. Harry stood a step behind, glancing at the brick walls and the narrow alley that funneled down to the back of Lannic’s shop. I could tell he was half-expecting some grand, theatrical welcome. The door creaked open, and there was Arthur Xavier—expression even, eyes scanning over the three of us before settling on me. “Right on time,” he said. He stepped back, holding the door just wide enough for us to enter. The air inside was warmer than outside, tinged with the smell of oil, metal shavings, and something faintly acrid—burnt ozone from machinery, maybe. The shopfront gave way to a back corridor, and then down a set of narrow stairs to the place where the real business happened. We followed Arthur down, the sound of our boots echoing on the steps. The room opened up into a low-ceilinged chamber, lit by pale electroplasmic light. Around a large table, four men had been deep in conversation—Lannic Morrow himself, flanked by Adrian Blackwood and Silas Thorn, with Arthur now stepping back to his seat. They looked up as we entered. Lannic was the first to move. He rose from his chair with a smooth, practiced ease, his burned skin catching the light in a way that made the damage impossible to ignore. The scars were old, worn into him like the weathering of a monument—ugly, but carried with a kind of pride. His smile was disarming, almost warm, as he crossed the room to greet us.

“Ah, the new Crows from Crow’s Ward,” Lannic said, extending his hand first to me, then Jack, then Harry. His grip was firm, his eyes sharp, measuring each of us in turn. “Welcome. I’ve heard about your recent… accomplishments. Quite the stunt you pulled at the race.” Harry beamed at that, and Jack’s smirk practically took over his face. I kept my own expression neutral, watching Lannic’s body language for any tells. Too much friendliness in Doskvol was usually a mask for something else. “We’ve got a job,” Lannic continued, turning back toward the table and gesturing for us to follow. “But before I explain, a little context. These—” he gestured to the scars running along his jaw and neck “—are what I call war scars. The Cyphers have been in open conflict with the Ember Circle for years now. They’ve tried to burn us out, crush our operations, and buy off our allies. We’ve given as good as we’ve got.” That drew a glance from Adrian, who’d been leaning against the table until now, watching us with the faintest trace of a scowl. I didn’t miss how his eyes lingered on Jack longer than the rest of us. It was Jack who broke the moment. “Hold on,” he said slowly, pointing a finger toward Adrian. “You. You were in that balloon during the race.” Adrian’s mouth twitched, but it wasn’t a smile. “Sharp eyes. Yes. And I remember you. Vividly.” His tone made it clear that whatever memory he had of Jack, it wasn’t fond. Jack tilted his head, clearly weighing whether to grin or play it cool. He settled for a faint smirk and stayed quiet.

“As I was saying,” Lannic continued, not missing a beat, “this upcoming task is not one I hand out lightly. If you agree to help, you’ll be putting yourselves in direct conflict with the Ember Circle. They are already less than pleased with you after your… aerial performance.” Arthur leaned forward slightly, his voice calm but firm. “Truth is, you’ve already drawn their attention

just by walking in here. Associate with the Cyphers, and you're on their list. No way around that." That made Harleena speak up. She had been quiet since we arrived, eyes taking in the details of the room, the people, and every shadow in the corners. "Then I want to know," she said, her voice steady, "how much danger are we talking about here?" For a moment, Lannic studied her as if deciding whether she was ready for the answer. Then he leaned forward, both hands flat on the table. "There's a word traveling through the alleys, whispered in corners. The Gloam Sisters have declared open season against you. Not just trouble—they're offering a reward for you. Dead or alive." Harry stiffened at that, the smile gone. Jack's smirk faded, replaced by a flicker of something more calculating. I just listened, filing it away. "And you all need to understand," Lannic went on, his tone losing its warmth, "the Gloam Sisters are not just another gang. They are the most dangerous, most entrenched power in Doskvol's underworld. Their reach is longer than you think. If you want to survive what's coming, you'll need allies in this city. Strong ones. Because without them… you won't last long." The room went still. The only sound was the faint hum of the lanterns, like the city itself was holding its breath.

The silence after Lannic's warning sat heavy in the air, like smoke that refused to clear. I could see Jack's mind working before he even spoke—his eyes narrowed just a fraction, his smirk slowly curling back into place. When he finally stepped forward, his tone was calm, but there was that familiar edge of performance to it, the kind of voice he used when he wanted everyone in the room to believe he was in control. "In that case," Jack began, resting a hand casually on the back of a chair as if we were all just discussing the weather, "we'll take the job. But there's one condition—if the Crows stand for the Cyphers today, the Cyphers stand for the Crows tomorrow. If the Gloam Sisters, the Ember Circle, or any other charming lot comes knocking, I expect to know we have friends worth the trouble we're about to get into." It was a neat little speech, I'll give him that. No bluff in his voice, either. He wasn't asking; he was setting terms. I didn't say anything, but I didn't need to. From where I stood, I could see how Harry's eyes lit up a little, the faintest grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. He liked the sound of it—liked the idea of the Crows having big-name allies. Harleena was harder to read. Her gaze flicked from Jack to Lannic, to Arthur, back to Jack. If I had to guess, she wasn't sold on the idea of jumping headfirst into another war just because Jack said so. But she didn't speak against him either. Maybe she was weighing the odds and figuring she'd be outvoted anyway.

Lannic didn't hesitate. He nodded once, slow and deliberate. "Fair enough. You help me with this, and I'll make sure you've got the Cyphers at your back when you need us." He let the weight of that promise hang in the air before leaning back slightly. "Besides… you've already done good work for me." He turned his eyes to Jack—there was something sly in them now. "Those blueprints you acquired? They've already paid off. I improved on the design, refined the flaws, and now we've built something… remarkable. A working prototype." My brow twitched. He wasn't speaking like this was some lucky haul. This was pride talking. Investment talking. Lannic's voice lowered a fraction, more for dramatic effect than secrecy. "We've tried to move one of these machines out of Doskvol before, but the Ember Circle intercepted us. It was a… costly failure." From beside me, Harleena's voice cut in, steady and skeptical. "So, was there a mole? Someone feeding them your plans?" Lannic met her eyes without flinching. "No. I trust my people. Completely. There was no betrayal—just bad luck and a very determined enemy." I wasn't entirely convinced, but if he believed his crew was airtight, that was his business.

"This time," he continued, "I want the Crows to help move the second prototype. Get it out of my grounds, deliver it to Gaddwick Train Station. I've already arranged for it to be picked up there. Easy task." Easy. In my experience, that was the most dangerous word in the city. "How exactly are you planning to move it?" I asked, because that was the part that mattered. It was Adrian who answered, his tone carrying that easy charm of his. "Funny thing—something you said at The Shadows' Den actually gave us the idea. Two identical carriages, both reinforced to carry the load. One is the real deal. The other is completely empty. A decoy." Harry leaned in with interest. "So which one's the distraction?" That's when Lannic smiled, and it wasn't the friendly

one from earlier—it was the smile of a man who enjoys the game more than the prize. “That’s the beauty of it. Nobody will know. Not the Circle, not the Imperial Polices, not even you. Only I’ll know which carriage carries the real machine. You’ll be moving both.” Jack chuckled under his breath. “So we’ve got a fifty-fifty chance of delivering the real thing without even knowing it.”

“Fifty percent of a guaranteed delivery,” Lannic corrected smoothly. “More or less.” The room was quiet for a heartbeat. No one said it out loud, but we were all thinking the same thing: this wasn’t going to be as easy as he was making it sound.

Two nights later, the damp chill of Doskvol’s streets seemed to creep in through the cracks of Lannic’s underground workshop. The air was heavy with coal smoke and the tang of salt from the distant harbor, a reminder that before the night was through, part of us would be moving over water while the rest threaded their way through the city’s twisting arteries. The prototype—whatever miracle of gears and craft it truly was—sat hidden inside one of two identical carriages. Both were broad and heavy, reinforced with steel beams hidden beneath weather-darkened paneling. To any casual observer, they were nothing more than cargo wagons—hauling crates of salted fish or barrels of lamp oil. Inside one, however, sat the future. The other was nothing but a hollow shell, a lure for the Ember Circle to waste themselves on. The Crows stood near the carriages, going over the plan one final time. Jack and Harleena would be the ones to take the wheel, driving the real—or perhaps the false—cargo through the streets, their route already mapped to avoid the worst choke points. Arthur Xavier would be their shadow, following close, ready to counter any assault with that blend of precision and resourcefulness he was known for. Harry and I would split off. Our job was to follow with the second wagon in a path not by road, but by water—slipping into the darkness aboard a narrow, low-slung skiff built for speed and silence. Just the two of us, running close enough to respond if the Circle struck at the riverside, but far enough to pass unnoticed among the clutter of night boats.

Constant—Conrad Rian to the tax ledger, but Constant to everyone who mattered—was to move ahead of the convoy entirely, partnered with Adrian Blackwood. The two of them would work in tandem to crack open any Ember Circle ambushes before they could snap shut, clearing the road with quiet precision or loud violence, depending on what the night called for. And above it all, watching the water like a hawk from some unseen perch, would be Silas Thorn. He had chosen his overwatch position earlier in the day, a vantage point that would let him deliver sniper fire in the event Harry and I ran into trouble. I kept my eyes on the map spread over a crate between the two wagons, noting the split routes and the intersections where our timing would be most critical. The air around the group hummed with a low, tense energy. Jack was leaning in close to Harleena, discussing the handling of the reins in tight streets. Harry was running his palm along the skiff’s hull, as if the boat itself could tell him something about the night ahead. That’s when I saw him. Constant entered like the city owed him a favor. Lean, sharp-featured, eyes carrying both a tired wisdom and a perpetual dare, he was the kind of man who could turn a room without raising his voice. His blond hair was deliberately unkempt, his trench coat long and worn, smelling faintly of rain and tobacco. The cigarette clinging to his lip curled a thin ribbon of smoke into the air, and his half-smile was the kind you didn’t know whether to trust or punch.

“So,” he said, voice like rough silk, “you lot are the Crows. Heard some things. A few of them even flattering.” Harry grinned, Jack smirked, Harleena’s face remained a stone wall. Constant’s gaze slid over the group and landed on me. Without asking, he stepped forward and glanced down at the tarot deck I’d been idly shuffling. “Mind if I take a look, mate?”

“That depends,” I replied, “on what you’re looking for.”

“My luck for the night.”

I passed him the deck. He shuffled with the kind of practiced grace that only comes from years of making your hands lie for you, then drew a card. He stared at it for a long moment, the light catching in his eyes in a way I didn’t like. A quiet, humorless chuckle. “Same as before. Figures.” He slipped the card back into the deck and returned it to me without explanation. When he walked away, I glanced down at the top card.The Fool. It was a card with a double edge—beginnings, yes, but also mistakes, deception, and betrayal dressed as opportunity.

The rest of the crew hadn’t noticed. Constant was already with Adrian now, the two of them talking like old co-conspirators.

Lannic entered then, his presence filling the workshop with the kind of calculated confidence only men like him could carry. “Friends,” he said, “tonight we move more than a machine—we move a piece of the future. One of these wagons will reach Gaddwick Station. The other will lead the Circle astray. Which is which…” He gave a sly smile. “That’s for me to know, and for the Circle to lose sleep over. Your job is to make sure both keep moving until I have my prize safe on the other side.” The drivers climbed onto their benches. Outside, the streets glistened under a thin drizzle, the water reflecting the dim orange glow of the gaslamps. Somewhere out there, the Ember Circle waited, their fire hidden in the night. Harry and I moved toward the skiff, the oars already set in place, the hull light enough to slip unseen between shadows. Harleena and Jack took their position at the head of the lead carriage, Arthur mounting his own ride just behind. Constant and Adrian drifted toward the darkness ahead, silent predators. Somewhere above, unseen, Silas Thorn was already waiting for his chance to fire. The Fool card burned cold in my pocket as I stepped into the boat. Whatever lay ahead, luck had already chosen its game.

Rabbit’s Foot and Harry shoved off from the Cyphers’ hidden dock, their small skiff cutting a black ripple across the canal. The night air was damp and heavy, smelling of rust, coal smoke, and the faint brine of the distant sea. In the stern, Harry kept his strokes slow and even, the oarlocks muffled with cloth to keep their passage silent. In the bow, Rabbit kept low, one hand resting on the tarpaulin that covered the small carriage lashed tightly to the boat’s reinforced deck. The thing weighed more than it looked, the boat sitting low in the water as they glided into the shadowed maze of Doskvol’s waterways. Their route hugged the darker lanes between Gloamhaven and the long channel that fed toward Gaddwick Station. The lamps here were few, and those that remained were warped, the glass dimmed by decades of soot and damp. A place where the black water swallowed sound, where ripples seemed to vanish without a trace. Rabbit’s mind kept circling back to the Fool card. He could almost feel it burning in his coat pocket, a cold brand whispering that someone, somewhere in this web, was lying to him. Or maybe all of them were. He was used to risk—risk was his trade—but tonight there was a different weight in his gut. A weight that said trust no one, not even the friends rowing beside you.

They passed beneath the broken span of the bridge leading toward the Lost District, its skeletal supports lost in the fog above. Neither man noticed the faint glimmer—a flick of motion against the darkness far overhead. From the bridge’s shadow, a rope slid down, swallowed by the night. A figure descended with the precision of a practiced hunter, their body swallowed in black, limbs moving slow and deliberate so that the rope made no sound against the stone. They hung just above the skiff for a breath, timing the roll of the water and the shift of the oars. Then—quiet as the fall of dust—they landed on the rear deck, crouched low, hidden beneath the tarpaulin’s shadow. Rabbit kept his eyes on the fog ahead. Harry’s strokes never faltered. Neither saw the intruder at all.

Across town, the wheels of another carriage rattled on cobblestones.

Jack sat high on the driver's bench, the reins slack in his hands but his eyes alive and watchful. Beside him, Harleena kept her arms folded, her gaze darting from alleyway to rooftop, scanning every shadow with the sharp-eyed suspicion of someone who had been in too many ambushes to ignore her instincts. The streets were never truly quiet in Doskvol, not even at night. Vendors shouted their last bargains, hawking roasted eel skewers and cheap bottles of black-market whiskey. Dockhands laughed loud in the doorways of smoke-filled taverns. Somewhere, the low wail of a whistle cut through the night, followed by the heavy clang of factory machinery changing shift. Jack broke the silence first. "You notice," he murmured, "how our friend Lannic never told us *which* wagon has the prize? Means if the Circle grabs one, they still have to guess." Harleena didn't look at him. "Means if they grab *us*, we can't even tell them the truth to save our skins."

"Ever the optimist." Jack's smirk was audible. "Ever the realist," she shot back. "You're grinning because you like this game. But these aren't barroom hustles, Jack. People bleed out in gutters over jobs like this." Jack's smile flattened, just a little. "I know." They turned down a narrower lane, hooves striking sparks from uneven stone. That's when Jack's eyes caught the faint slash of red paint across the road—a line running from one side to the other. Adrian's signal. Danger. He eased the reins, bringing the carriage to a slow roll. Harleena's hand moved toward the concealed pistol beneath her coat. The street looked normal enough—lantern light spilling from windows, the muffled laughter of patrons in nearby doorways. But Adrian didn't mark false alarms. "Keep it slow," Harleena murmured, her voice low and tight. Jack guided the horses forward, their ears flicking uneasily. The red line disappeared beneath the wheels. Nothing happened. No shapes stepping from the shadows, no burst of fire from a rooftop. And then they saw it ahead—an Imperial Police checkpoint. Officers in dark greatcoats stood at the intersection, halting every cart and carriage, lanterns swinging in their hands. A pair of them carried rifles. One by one, they were making drivers step down, checking papers, searching cargo. Jack's jaw tightened. "That's not for contraband," he muttered. "They're looking for someone."

"Or something," Harleena corrected. The horses slowed as they approached the barrier. Harleena felt the weight of the cargo behind her like a pulse in the dark. Jack pulled the forged papers from his coat, his expression already sliding into the mask he wore when the truth was dangerous. The officer who approached was tall, clean-shaven, eyes like chips of slate. He took the papers without a word, scanning them slowly. "What's your business here?" he asked at last. Jack's voice was smooth, almost bored. "Delivering goods from Gloamhaven to Gaddwick Station. Tight schedule." The officer's gaze shifted past him to the carriage itself, then to Harleena, lingering a moment too long. Another officer circled the wagon, peering into shadows and seams. Jack leaned forward, letting his voice drop just enough for the man to hear. "I believe Inspector Fransz is expecting us. I am a Lucky Man." The phrase hung in the air between them—meaningless to most, but sharp as a key in the right lock. The officer's eyes narrowed, just slightly. The officer's demeanor shifted with almost comical abruptness, the stern mask cracking into something closer to polite recognition. "Fransz, you say?" he muttered, voice suddenly less rigid. His eyes darted back to the papers, but it was only the kind of glance a man gives when he already knows he's going to wave you through. After a brief pause, he nodded. "Right. You're good to go."

Jack's relief had just begun to bloom when another figure stepped forward from behind the checkpoint barrier—a taller man with the squared shoulders and expression of someone who liked being the one who said *no*. "I still need to check the cargo," he said flatly, planting himself at the side of the carriage. That could not happen. Jack's smile didn't falter, but behind it his

mind sharpened to a razor's edge. He leaned forward slightly, his gaze catching the officer's like a hook catching cloth. The faintest ripple of arcane suggestion slipped through the air between them—silent, invisible, but insistent—tugging on the threads of memory like a thief loosening the drawstring of a coin purse. The man's confident stance wavered. His eyes flickered, unfocused for a moment, like he had just walked into a room and forgotten why. The officer stepped back without another word, his hand lifting in a vague gesture that might have meant "carry on" or might have meant nothing at all. Either way, they were through. The wheels creaked and the horses pulled them forward, hooves clopping steadily against the slick cobblestones. Fog swirled thick around the gaslamps overhead, softening their glow until the light became little more than pale halos hovering in the mist. The streets here were quieter, but quieter in the way of Doskvol—where silence felt more like an ambush holding its breath than any true peace.

"Something's not right," Harleena murmured. Her eyes didn't leave the shifting shadows between the alleyways. Without waiting for Jack's reply, she tugged hard on the reins and guided the carriage into a narrower side street, the wagon's wooden frame groaning slightly at the turn. Jack didn't argue. Harleena's instincts had kept them alive too many times to ignore. The fog seemed thicker here, clinging to the street until it looked like the horses were pushing through milk. Somewhere distant, metal rang against metal—hammer on anvil, perhaps, or blade on blade. The sound faded as quickly as it had come, swallowed whole by the city. Then came the hooves. They started as a low thrum, barely distinct from the clatter of their own horses. But in seconds, the rhythm grew sharper, faster—closing in. From the mist behind them emerged two silhouettes on horseback, each one carrying a crossbow drawn taut. Their approach was unnervingly quiet for such heavy beasts, the riders leaning low, faces obscured by cowls and the murk. Harleena's jaw tightened, her grip on the reins steady but tense. Jack's mind flicked rapidly through options, counting the narrow space between the buildings, the angles of escape that didn't exist. The riders were almost upon them when salvation came from the flank. A third horse burst from the fog with the force of a breaking wave—Arthur Xavier, his mount pounding the stones in a relentless charge. He cut in between the carriage and the closest attacker, pistol already raised. The crack of the shot ripped through the night, echoing off the walls. The first rider jerked backwards in his saddle, arms flailing before he tumbled to the ground in a boneless heap. His horse reared violently before bolting into the fog, hooves clattering in panic.

"Jack, distract him!" Harleena's voice was sharp, threaded with urgency. Jack's hand darted into his coat and found the pouch of flash powder Rabbit had slipped him earlier. He flicked it out with a practiced motion, and the small bundle caught air before erupting into a blinding burst of white light. The flare tore through the mist like a miniature sun, bathing the street in sharp glare and jagged shadows. The second rider's horse shrieked and reared, hooves scraping the air. The man fought to keep control, but his balance faltered for just a moment—and that was enough. Harleena's pistol barked once, the muzzle flash momentarily overpowering the lingering glow of the powder. Her shot hit low, catching the animal's leg. The horse crumpled with a pained whinny, pitching the rider headlong into the cobblestones. The sound of his body hitting stone was dull but final. Jack and Harleena didn't waste a heartbeat. They pulled the carriage to a halt, both jumping down. The fog clung to everything here, muting the sounds of the city until the only noise was the groaning breath of the fallen rider and the restless snort of their horses. Jack scanned the alley mouths and rooftops, his eyes moving with the twitching paranoia of someone who knew that a single shadow could hide a dozen knives. Harleena strode to the man, flipped him over with a practiced motion, and yanked his arms behind his back. The rope wound around his wrists tight, her movements swift and efficient.

"You're coming with us," she said, her voice low but devoid of mercy. The man grunted but didn't resist—either too stunned or too smart to try. They dragged him into the carriage, shutting the door before climbing back up to their seats. The horses lurched forward again, hooves clicking faster now, the fog swallowing the scene they left behind. It was only once they'd put a few more

streets between themselves and the fight that Harleena finally broke the silence. “That phrase you used back there,” she said, eyes still on the road but her voice cutting through the clop of hooves. “‘I am a lucky man.’ Where did that come from?” Jack’s mouth twitched into a half-smile, though his eyes stayed fixed forward. “Truth? I don’t know what it means.” She turned her head sharply toward him. “You don’t *know*?”

“Rabbit told me to say it,” Jack admitted. “Said to use the Inspector’s name too. Guess he bribed someone ahead of time—insurance in case Imperial hands tried to slow us down tonight.” Harleena’s laugh was short and humorless. “And you didn’t think to ask what it meant?” Jack’s gaze didn’t shift from the road ahead. “Sometimes, not knowing is the only way the magic works.” She let out a slow breath through her nose, saying nothing more. But the faint shake of her head was clear enough—Harleena didn’t trust magic, or luck, or the vague promises of others. Not when the stakes were life or death. And especially not when the cargo in the back might make them all targets before the night was over.

The water was calm enough to lull an unwary man into forgetting the danger, but Rabbit’s Foot knew better.

He and Harry moved with quiet, deliberate precision, their little boat gliding along the black ribbon of canal between the looming shapes of warehouses and shadow-choked alleys. Every ripple felt louder than it should, every creak of the wooden hull like an accusation hurled into the night. The city loomed above them in jagged silhouettes—slate rooftops and crooked chimneys, with here and there the dim glimmer of a gas lamp casting a pale halo in the mist. It was the kind of night that pressed in from all sides, the fog thick enough to make the air taste of rust and smoke. Rabbit’s mind wandered despite himself. The Fool card still gnawed at him, an itch in the back of his thoughts. *New beginnings, naivety, deception.* In his experience, it was rarely an omen you could smile about. His gaze kept flicking from shadow to shadow, searching for the lie that would make itself known too late. That was when he heard it.

It wasn’t the slap of water against the hull or the slow groan of the timbers—it was softer, wrong somehow. A faint rustle, like a coat brushing against wood, coming from the direction of the hold. Rabbit’s head snapped toward the sound. The hairs at the back of his neck prickled. “Intruder,” he hissed, low but sharp enough to make Harry’s head jerk up. A shape moved at the edge of the lamplight—a figure in dark, damp clothes stepping into view. His face was half-hidden beneath a scarf, his posture tense but confident. In his hand, a pistol gleamed faintly. The barrel swung toward them. Before Rabbit could draw, Harry reacted—his arm slicing through the air with a sharp, practiced motion. Words of power spilled from his lips, and in an instant his skin took on the dull, hard sheen of granite. The gunshot cracked through the night, the flash briefly illuminating the intruder’s narrowed eyes. The bullet struck Harry square in the chest, but instead of blood, there was the metallic ring of ricochet. The slug spun off, catching the intruder in the shoulder. The man staggered back with a grunt, his pistol clattering to the deck. Rabbit moved instantly, pistol out, boots silent on the damp planks as he closed the distance. But the intruder’s other hand was already producing something—a small glass bottle, rag protruding from its mouth. The Molotov arced through the air in a blur.

It struck the deck between them and burst in a roar of fire. The sudden blaze surged upward, heat licking Rabbit’s face. The acrid smell of burning pitch and oil hit his nose, and the boat groaned under the sudden violence. Harry swore, his stone-plated hands shielding his eyes from the glare. Rabbit didn’t hesitate. He took a breath, lowered his head, and leapt. He plunged straight through the heat, the hem of his coat smoking, boots hitting the deck on the other side in a solid, practiced landing. The pistol was already up. His voice was low but sharp as a knife:

“Stop now or die.” The man froze, his breath ragged, eyes darting between Rabbit and the knife he’d half-pulled from his belt. For a moment Rabbit thought the fool might try it anyway. But something—maybe the steady aim of the gun, maybe the absolute certainty in Rabbit’s tone—made him stop. Slowly, he let the knife clatter to the deck and raised both hands in surrender. “Tell me,” Rabbit said, reaching into his coat and pulling out a small brass compass. The thing was delicate, intricate—its dial etched with strange glyphs instead of numbers, its needle trembling faintly. He tilted it toward the man, letting the lamplight catch it. “What traps are waiting for us along the river?” The man’s eyes widened. He knew what it was. Or thought he did. Desire flickered there, quickly masked by caution. His lips pressed into a thin line. Then, with a sudden surge of motion, he spun and hurled himself over the railing. “Damn it!” Rabbit lunged to the edge, catching only a glimpse of his form vanishing into the black water below. Ripples spread and faded, swallowed by the canal’s darkness. Behind him, the fire was spreading, oily flames crawling across the deck. Harry was already there, beating at them with a soaked tarp, cursing under his breath. The smell was choking now, the smoke stinging Rabbit’s eyes as he grabbed a bucket, scooped water over the flames, and joined in the fight to save their vessel. The fire died reluctantly, leaving behind scorched planks and a thin curl of smoke that drifted into the fog. Rabbit straightened, breathing hard, scanning the shadows for any sign of their would-be saboteur. Nothing. Just the oppressive dark and the lapping of the water.

Then Harry’s voice cut through the night, sharp with alarm. “Rabbit.” Rabbit turned—and froze. There, rising above the rooftops in the distance, was a balloon. A large, black silhouette against the faint glow of the clouded moon. Painted across its surface in blood-red, unmistakable even at this distance, was the emblem of the Ember Circle. His stomach sank. “This is not good,” he muttered. The balloon was a signal. A message to the city’s underworld, and to them in particular. The Circle was mobilizing. Whatever was in those carriages—prototype or decoy—had just become the center of a storm. “Harry,” Rabbit said, forcing his voice steady, “we keep moving. No stops, no detours.” Harry met his gaze, his stone skin already fading back to flesh, but his expression no less determined. “We’ll get it there.” Rabbit nodded, more to convince himself than anything else. The Fool’s warning still gnawed at him, louder now. Somewhere in this night, there was a lie waiting to trip them. He didn’t know who it would come from, or when, but he could feel it. They pushed off again, the oars dipping into the water with slow, deliberate strokes. Ahead, the city’s skyline rose like jagged teeth against the sky. Somewhere beyond it lay their destination. Somewhere behind it, the Ember Circle’s shadow stretched, long and merciless, over everything they did. And Rabbit knew—one way or another—before this night was done, something was going to burn.

Ashmere Hall’s narrow streets felt like a maze designed to close in on them.

The gaslamps burned low, throwing long, thin shadows that seemed to lurch with every turn of the carriage wheels. Jack kept a tight grip on the reins, urging the horses forward, while Harleena’s eyes darted constantly, reading the streets like an assassin scanning for the kill. Every alley, every rooftop was a possible death trap. The air itself seemed to grow colder, denser, and then Jack felt it—his Spiritbane charm growing warm in his pocket, pulsing with a dull, ghostly light. It was a warning, the kind you didn’t ignore. His knuckles tightened around the reins. “Something’s coming,” he muttered. The warning came too late. A sharp whistle sliced the air, followed by the wet, heavy thud of an arrow slamming into one of their lead horses. The animal screamed, a raw, gut-wrenching sound, and crumpled mid-stride. The carriage jolted violently, wood groaning in protest. Before Jack could curse, a second arrow shot through the fog and struck the other lead horse in the flank. It went down hard, throwing the whole rig into a desperate, jerking skid. From the shadows ahead emerged something that should not exist.

At first, Jack thought it was a rider—a man astride a horse—but the wrongness of it hit him like a blow. The thing stepped into the sickly light of a nearby lamp, and the truth was far worse. The bottom half was the corpse of a great black stallion, its hide torn and stitched crudely together, patches of fur missing to reveal rotting muscle beneath. The top half was the upper torso of a dead man—skin grey, mouth hanging open to reveal blackened teeth—its chest crudely fused to the horse's body with thick, tar-like sutures. One of its arms was twisted unnaturally, the bone visible through split flesh, and yet it moved with an awful, unnatural purpose. A shiver went down Harleena's spine. She'd seen horrors in Doskvol, but this—this was something else. An aberration against nature itself. Only dark magic could make such a thing move. She didn't need to guess who had done it. The Gloam Sisters. The realization hit her like ice water. If the Sisters were here, working with the Ember Circle to stop this convoy, then this mission was more than a job. It was a declaration of war. The Crows had crossed two of the most dangerous criminal powers in the city—simultaneously. The implications were enough to make her throat tighten. Jack's reaction was different. Rage lit behind his eyes. "They knew," he growled under his breath, his mind racing. "They knew we'd be here tonight. That means there's a mole…" His hands clenched on the reins. *But who?*

The undead centaur let out a sound that was neither horse nor man—a rasping, gurgling hiss that seemed to vibrate in the bones. Then it charged. Jack snapped the reins, forcing the crippled carriage to lurch backward just enough to keep its wheels from shattering. Harleena was already moving, swinging her rifle from her back and chambering an electroplasm round in one smooth, practiced motion. The weapon hummed with contained lightning as she took aim. The first shot hit the centaur square in the horse's chest. Blue arcs of energy crawled over the rotting flesh, muscles twitching violently. It staggered but kept coming. Jack swore, reached for a pouch at his belt, and hurled a handful of flash powder into its face. The burst of white light lit up the fog, momentarily blinding the abomination. That was all the opening Harleena needed. She fired again, this time for the human half's skull. The electroplasm exploded on impact, sending black ichor spraying across the cobbles. The centaur let out a final, unnatural shriek before collapsing in a tangle of limbs and rotting flesh, twitching as the electroplasm burned through it. The street went still. Their horses lay dead, the carriage damaged but still upright. Harleena wiped her mouth with the back of her glove, her hands trembling despite herself. Jack was staring down the street, jaw tight. "If they wanted to scare us," he muttered, "it worked."

They were still catching their breath when a faint *pop* broke the silence behind them. Constant appeared as if he'd stepped out of a tear in the air itself. His coat was singed in places, oil stains smeared across the fabric. The smell of burned hair and scorched leather clung to him, and there were fresh cuts on his cheek and knuckles. Whatever fight he'd just left, it hadn't been easy. "Evening, folks," he said, voice calm but edged with fatigue. "Got a smoke, Harleena?" She tossed him one wordlessly, and he caught it without looking. The match flared, and for a moment his face was illuminated—sweat-slick, eyes sharp despite the exhaustion. He took a drag, exhaled smoke through a thin smile. "Listen," he began, the tone shifting to deadly serious. "We've got a problem. The Ember Circle's got an ambush set up just ahead. Nasty one. But worse—your boat boys? Rabbit and Harry? They've got company. Emberwing sent reinforcements. If we don't get there soon, they're not walking away." Jack and Harleena exchanged a look—hers tight with worry, his already calculating the next move. "We'll go," Jack said without hesitation. "You stay with the convoy until we call you." Constant nodded, reaching into his coat and pulling out a small glass bottle. Inside, a swirling mass of pale light shifted and coiled like smoke in water. "Magic," he said simply, holding it out. "Stored spell. You can put certain kinds of magic in objects—bottles, stones, charms. Makes them easy to use, even for folks who can't sling a spell to save their skin. Uncork it, and it'll take you right to where you need to be. In this case—Rabbit's boat." Jack took it carefully, the glass warm in his palm. Harleena gave Constant one last look. "Keep the convoy safe. If this is war now, we can't afford to lose it before it starts." Constant smirked, but his eyes told a different story. "Go. Before

there's no one left to save." Jack uncorked the bottle. The light inside surged outward in a rush, engUlricing them in a whirl of heat and wind. The street dissolved.

When the world snapped back into place, they were standing on the deck of Rabbit's boat—face to face with a startled Rabbit's Foot and Harry. "What the hell? Jack! Harleena! How did you—" Rabbit began, but Jack cut him off. "No time to explain. Look up." Above them, blotting out the stars, hung a massive balloon bearing the blazing emblem of the Ember Circle. Ropes dangled from its basket, and from one of them a barrel was being lowered slowly, deliberately—straight toward the boat. The roar of the balloon's burner still echoed in my ears when Harry's voice cut through the chaos. "What do we do?" he asked, his tone laced with a sharp edge of fear that I couldn't blame him for. I didn't get the chance to answer. Jack's voice came from behind me, urgent and commanding. "Change course! Now!" He was already pushing past, seizing the tiller like it was an extension of his own body. The boat lurched hard to port, the hull scraping against the damp stone walls of the narrow canal as we shot into a side passage barely wide enough for us to clear. Water splashed up, cold and foul-smelling, drenching my coat. Above us, the balloon shifted its position, staying directly overhead. They were ready for this turn.

I could see the shadows moving up there, silhouettes of men leaning over the side of the basket, muscles taut as they heaved another barrel into position. The thick rope creaked under its weight. My stomach sank. Before they could drop it, the crack of Harleena's rifle split the air. The barrel jolted, spun, and then ruptured midair. A dark spray fanned out in the lamplight, raining down over the water in front of us. The sharp, chemical tang hit me instantly. "It's oil!" Harleena shouted, her voice cutting through the wind. "Be careful!" For a heartbeat, I thought that was the end of it—just another hazard to avoid. But then Harry's expression hardened into something I'd only seen a handful of times: that dangerous, resolute calm right before he did something reckless. He murmured something under his breath—old words, guttural and strange—and then his hands ignited. A globe of swirling orange flame swelled between his palms, casting a sick glow over his stone-hardened skin.

"Harry, wait—" I started, but it was already too late.

He flung the Cinder Bloom into the slick of oil floating on the water. It hit with a sound like a muffled thunderclap, and the canal erupted into a wall of flame. The heat hit me first—a wave of searing air rolling off the canal as Harry's Cinder Bloom hit the oil slick. The explosion was blinding, a muffled *whump* that sent ripples across the black water and shook the very boards under our feet. In an instant, the canal in front of us transformed into a writhing wall of fire, orange and gold licking skyward, thick black smoke curling into the night. The balloon above groaned under the assault. The flame's heat swelled upward in a hungry rush, and I could *hear* the fabric crisping, shrinking, and tearing under the invisible hands of the inferno. "Damn it—if that thing drops onto the roofs, we'll have half the district on fire!" Harleena's voice cut through the roar, sharp with alarm. She was right. The balloon was drifting sideways now, losing height in uneven jerks. Below it, the close-packed rooftops of Gloamhaven glistened with damp tiles, but even wet slate wouldn't save them from that much burning fabric. My mind flashed through a dozen possible disasters—the blaze catching on the roof beams, spreading through the market stalls, the people trapped in their upper rooms with no escape. This wasn't just a fight anymore; this was a potential massacre. Jack, however, didn't seem to share my worry. He was grinning, actually grinning, like a gambler who'd just pulled the winning hand. "Yes! Down you go!" he shouted, slamming a triumphant fist into the side of the tiller. "Harry, you beautiful bastard, you just cooked 'em alive!"

The attackers clearly knew they were finished. I saw them scrambling in the basket, shadows moving in the glow, before one by one they hurled themselves into the canal. The splash of bodies vanishing into the water barely registered before my eyes caught something far worse—our carriage, the one lashed to the back of the boat. The fire, pushed forward by the

heat's own rising currents, had found it. It went up like dry tinder. One moment it was just sitting there, wooden sides blackening, the next it was a roaring pyre, flames chewing through every plank and wheel in seconds. I caught the metallic snap of the axle giving way, and then the whole mass collapsed inward, sending a wave of sparks across the deck. "Rabbit!" Harry barked, snapping me back to motion. We scrambled to cut it free, but the ropes burned through before we even reached them. The ruined, burning wreck slipped off the stern and into the canal with a hiss that filled the air with a choking cloud of steam and smoke. And just like that, the truth became obvious. The fire had claimed only the decoy. The real prototype was still out there—safe with the second convoy. I exhaled, tension leaving me in one sharp rush. "It was the fake," I said, meeting Harleena's eyes. "That was the bloody *decoy*." Jack straightened, looking far too satisfied for my liking. "Which means the real one's still in play. Time to go find Constant before the Circle or the Sisters decide to burn that one too." We turned the boat toward the Night Market, pushing hard on the oars. Every splash seemed too loud, every shadow on the water a threat. I kept glancing over my shoulder for another balloon, but the sky was clear—at least for now. When we reached the mouth of a wider canal near the edge of the market, the sound hit us first. Not just shouting and chaos—this was a *fight*, the kind you could feel in the air. Steel against steel, claws raking wood, the guttural, inhuman sounds of something that had no business walking in this world.

And then we saw him.

Constant was in the thick of it, coat torn, shirt front scorched and peppered with holes where fire had kissed too close. His hair was damp with sweat, a streak of blood tracing down his jaw from a shallow cut, but his eyes were alive with that dangerous light he carried when the fight was going his way. One of his opponents was an undead centaur—its upper half the desiccated corpse of a man, eyes clouded white, its mouth stitched crudely shut. The lower half was the rotting remains of a warhorse, ribs showing through stretched, cracking hide. It moved in jerky, unnatural bursts, hooves slamming the cobbles so hard I could *feel* each impact reverberate through the water. The other creature was worse—if you could even compare them. A grotesque hybrid of monkey and eagle, its twisted body patched together with mismatched bones and sinew. Great blackened wings sprouted from its back, though one hung at a crooked angle as if broken. Its head was a mess of matted fur and twisted beak, snapping and screeching as it lunged for Constant's throat. He moved like smoke, ducking under the centaur's swinging arm and driving a blade into the half-bird's side. Sparks of magic burst from the wound as the thing screeched in pain. Even from here I could smell the corruption—a mix of rot, feathers, and the cold, sour stink of death magic. "Looks like we found him," I muttered, drawing my pistol. "Let's go help him before *he's* the next one stitched together," Harleena said, already loading another electroplasm round. We pushed in, ready to drag Constant out of the hell he was wading through.

The moment our boots hit the cobbles, the noise consumed us—shouts, the panicked bleating of goats from overturned carts, and underneath it all that *rhythmic pounding*, like war drums in the distance but coming closer fast. We didn't get long to dwell on it. The sound hit us first—a deep, thunderous pounding, hooves striking cobblestone in a relentless rhythm. Then they came into view: a pack of those undead centaurs charging through the narrow street ahead, scattering screaming civilians like dry leaves in a windstorm. They were nightmares in motion—stitched-together forms of man and beast, moving with jerky, unnatural precision, heads snapping and twisting with each stride. Their human torsos sagged and pulled unnaturally against the horse bodies below, as though each half fought the other for control. Empty, milk-white eyes stared dead ahead, unfazed by the chaos, their mouths sewn shut into twisted, silent grimaces. "This is madness," Harry muttered beside me, his voice almost swallowed by the chaos. "How do we fight back against *that*?"

“We hold our ground,” Constant barked, not taking his eyes off the oncoming charge. “Use your magic to keep them at bay.” His voice was calm but edged, like a gambler who knows he’s playing with his last chip. I pulled my revolver, the familiar cold weight settling into my palm. Snapping the cylinder open, I checked the rounds—electroplasmic, every one of them. My hands didn’t shake. My mind was a steel trap now, fear smelted down into something harder, sharper. I looked at Harry, meeting his eyes over the din. “Let’s give ’em hell.” We fanned out, Harleena already kneeling into a sharpshooter’s stance, her rifle aimed dead center at the lead centaur’s human half. Jack moved to flank, his pistol ready, that calculating edge in his eyes as he scanned for the rider who would drop first. Constant, still smelling faintly of scorched hair and smoke, stepped forward like he owned the street, trench coat swirling in the heat coming off the enemy. The first centaur hit the kill zone, its hooves sending chips of cobblestone flying. Harleena’s rifle cracked, and its upper torso snapped back in a shower of sparks as the electroplasm ripped through the dead flesh, sending its necrotic energy scattering into the air like smoke. It stumbled, legs collapsing, and Jack put a finishing shot into its skull before it hit the ground. Two more surged around the fallen one. Harry stepped forward, murmuring an incantation so low it was almost drowned out by the battle, his hands glowing with raw, shifting magic. A blast of blue-white light slammed into the centaurs, halting them mid-stride, frost crawling over their limbs. Their hooves scraped desperately at the stone, slowed but not stopped. That was my cue—I squeezed off two quick shots, each round finding the gap where human flesh met horse muscle, and the bodies folded into themselves like marionettes with their strings cut. We carved a path through them, each of us slotting into place like cogs in a killing machine—Constant with his knife work, brutal and efficient, Harleena’s cold precision, Jack’s opportunistic strikes, Harry’s magic, and my own steady rhythm of shot after shot. In less than a minute, the street was littered with unmoving bodies, the stench of burnt flesh and old rot curling into the back of my throat.

Constant jerked his chin toward the dark silhouette of the train yard gates ahead. “That’s our way in—move!” We pushed forward, weaving through back alleys until the yard opened before us, the black iron shapes of the Gaddwick freight lines looming like sleeping giants. There were more bodies here—Ember Circle foot soldiers already sprawled in pools of their own blood, steam hissing from ruptured pipes where stray fire rounds had hit. Constant pointed to a shadowed section of track where an empty freight car sat alone. “There. That’s the spot. Get the prototype there and keep it in one piece. Then get yourselves out alive.” No sooner had he said it than two figures stepped from the shadows near the freight car—and they were nothing like the fodder we’d fought so far. These were elites, the Circle’s best. Both were clad in segmented armour of blackened steel inlaid with ember-red runes, faint heat rippling off them in waves. The first wielded a massive, double-headed axe with fire licking along the blade’s edge. The second carried a heavy flamethrower rig strapped to his back, the nozzle glinting wet with fresh fuel. “You don’t get to leave here alive,” the axeman growled, his voice distorted by the heat shimmer around his helmet. They moved fast—faster than anything that heavily armoured had any right to. The flamethrower operator swept the nozzle toward us, a jet of fire roaring out in a blinding arc. I threw myself sideways, feeling the heat singe the edge of my coat. Harleena’s rifle cracked twice, the electroplasm shots sparking harmlessly off the enchanted plates. “Go for the joints!” Constant shouted, already engaging the axeman. The clang of steel rang sharp as Constant parried, his knife wreathed in some quick-cast ward that flared white with each hit. Jack darted behind the flamethrower, slashing at the fuel line. Sparks erupted as metal scraped, and the operator swung wildly, trying to knock him back.

I circled wide, taking aim at the thinner section between the shoulder plates. My shot hit home, and the man staggered, the burst of electroplasm crawling over his armour like angry lightning. Harry seized the moment, unleashing a focused bolt of magic that blew the flamethrower’s nozzle apart in a violent burst of flame and metal. The operator screamed, wreathed in his own fire, and collapsed. The axeman roared and redoubled his assault on Constant, forcing him back step by step. Harleena shifted position, sighted in on the gap under the arm, and fired. The

round punched through, sending a spray of superheated blood across the stones. I moved in beside her, adding two more shots to the gut and thigh until the giant finally fell, his axe clanging on the cobbles. For a moment, the yard was silent but for our heavy breathing. The prototype sat untouched on the carriage bed, its steel casing catching the faint glow from the burning wreckage nearby. Constant wiped his blade on the fallen axeman's armour. "That's it. Leave it here. Someone's coming to pick it up. Now get gone before more of them show." I looked once more at the prototype, then at the bodies around us. We'd done it—but Doskvol wasn't going to forget the night the Crows went to war with *two* of its deadliest factions. And neither would we.

Rabbit lingered at the edge of the yard, boots crunching on the gravel as he cast one last look at the convoy. Constant stood beside the prototype, his fingers tracing a quick, deliberate pattern in the air. A faint shimmer enveloped the steel casing—then, without so much as a sound, the whole thing winked out of sight. Invisible. Rabbit's brows lifted despite himself. This wasn't improvisation; this was the endgame of a plan Lannic had been weaving long before the Crows ever stepped into it. "Time to move," Constant muttered without looking back. They slipped into the darkened streets, the night still restless with distant shouts and the dull thud of running feet. When they neared the waterside, Rabbit's gaze caught on a flash of movement—steel clashing in the lamplight. A knot of fighters was holding the dock against Ember Circle reinforcements, their banner snapping in the wind. On a nearby moored boat, a familiar sigil was painted in bold, weathered strokes: the Skarrenfolk. And there—just visible through the smoke—was Elara, blade in hand, rallying her people with that calm, commanding fire he remembered. She saw him only for a moment, but it was enough—a quick nod between allies sharing the same war. Rabbit's mind ticked through the scorecard of their world now. Allies: the Skarrenfolk and their friends, perhaps Lord Veylock if his favor still held, the Cyphers by necessity… and them, the Crows. Enemies: the Ember Circle, the Gloam Sisters. No middle ground. No safe harbor. Jack had wanted to make a name for their crew—well, now they'd done it. They weren't just players anymore. They were part of the war. They followed the winding canal path away from the fighting, the glow of burning rooftops fading behind them, until the city swallowed the sounds of battle into its usual hum of distant industry and restless tides. Harry let out a long breath and stretched his shoulders. "I need a good sleep," he said, his tone somewhere between exhaustion and relief. Harleena smirked faintly, her eyes still scanning the shadows out of habit. "We all do. And I'd say we've earned it." Rabbit said nothing, only tugged his coat tighter against the night air, the pulse of the day's chaos still running under his skin. For now, they were alive, the mission was done, and the streets ahead were—at least for the moment—quiet. In Doskvol, that was as close to peace as anyone got.

The streets of Crow's Ward were unnervingly quiet as the Crows trudged home. The usual din of shouting vendors, drunken laughter, and the clatter of wagon wheels seemed muted tonight, as though the city itself was holding its breath. Jack walked in front, coat collar pulled high against the damp night air, his eyes fixed forward. Harleena's boots clicked sharply on the cobbles, each step betraying a restless energy. Rabbit trailed just behind her, his senses prickling—something was wrong. The air carried a faint tang of char, curling in from somewhere ahead, subtle but unmistakable.

"Something's not right," Rabbit murmured, scanning the shadows.

"I smell smoke," Harleena said, her voice tense, already quickening her pace.

That was all it took. The four of them broke into a run, the rhythm of their boots echoing through the narrow streets. As they rounded the final corner, their home came into view—and the dread in Rabbit's gut solidified into cold certainty. The front door hung crooked on its hinges, blackened around the edges. The windows were cracked and smeared with soot. Even from

outside, they could hear the faint, hollow groan of burnt timbers settling. They pushed inside, and the sight hit them like a physical blow. Their base—once a refuge, their sanctuary in this cutthroat city—was a wreck. The air reeked of smoke and scorched wood, undercut by the metallic scent of blood. Charred furniture lay toppled across the floor, splinters and ash crunching underfoot. The walls were blackened with soot, the paint blistered and peeling in grotesque curls. A jagged message had been burned directly into the plaster above the hearth, the words still faintly smoldering: *STAY OUT OF THE CIRCLE'S BUSINESS.*

"Where's Doctor Lazarus? And everyone else?" Jack's voice was sharp, urgent.

They didn't waste time answering. The crew split up, picking their way through the destruction, calling out for their missing companions.

Harleena's voice broke the tense silence. "Over here!"

She was in the garden—what was left of it. A young man lay sprawled in the dirt, his clothes singed and skin mottled with angry burns. His face was pale beneath the grime, his breaths shallow and uneven. Harleena dropped to her knees beside him, cradling his head with one hand while the other brushed soot from his face. "Jim Bob! Oh no, You were supposed to be healing… I'm sorry my friend…" Her voice cracked, the words trembling as she tried to keep her composure.

Meanwhile, Harry's shout came from below. "Found him! Basement!"

Rabbit and Jack rushed down the smoke-darkened stairs, the smell of charred wood stronger here. They found Harry crouched beside Doctor Lazarus, who lay slumped against the stone wall. His robes were scorched, and one side of his face was blistered from a burn. Harry was already working to lift him. "Come on, Doc. Wake up. We need you."

They carried him upstairs to a makeshift cot in what remained of the sitting room. Jim Bob was laid beside him, Harleena fussing over his burns with a gentleness few ever saw from her. For a long, tense moment, the only sounds were the ragged breaths of the wounded and the creak of the damaged building settling. Then Lazarus stirred, his eyes fluttering open. Pain filled them—but so did urgency.

"They came… while you were out," he rasped. "Ember Circle."

The Crows gathered close, hanging on every word.

"What happened?" Jack pressed. "Tell us everything."

Lazarus winced as he drew a breath. "I was here with this boy, a client. Jim bob. I was nursing him back to health. Thought we heard a noise at the door. Before we knew it, they were inside. Fast. Armed. They… they set fires, smashed everything. We fought back, but…" His voice faltered as he glanced at Jim Bob. "There were too many."

"Who led them?" Harleena demanded, her tone edged with fury.

"Emberlash's men," Lazarus said, each word tight with pain. "They said it was a message. Stay out of the Ember Circle's business… or next time, it'll be worse."

Rabbit's jaw clenched until it ached. Heat flared behind his eyes—not from the fires, but from the fury building in his chest. "This is because of tonight's mission. Someone told them we'd be gone."

“Someone betrayed us,” Harry said grimly.

Jack’s gaze swept the room, dark and calculating. “And that someone is going to regret it.”

Lazarus swallowed hard, his voice low but heavy with warning. “Be careful. They’ve allied with the Gloam Sisters. This wasn’t just an attack on your job—it was meant to cripple you before you could strike back.”

That landed like a hammer blow. The air seemed to thicken as the weight of the words settled in. The Ember Circle *and* the Gloam Sisters—two of the city’s most dangerous factions—were working together. And now, they were coming for the Crows.

Jack straightened, his voice cold as steel. “We’ll find the traitor, Doc. And we’ll make sure they wish they’d never crossed us.”

“No one hurts Jim Bob and gets away with it,” Harleena added, her tone fierce, her eyes sharp with resolve.

Rabbit met each of their gazes in turn, feeling the fire in his chest harden into something sharper, more focused. “First, we get Jim Bob and Lazarus back on their feet. Then we hunt the bastard down. And when we do, Emberlash and the Sisters will know exactly what happens when you strike at us.”

The four of them huddled closer to their wounded, the flickering lamplight catching in their eyes. The walls around them were scarred and blackened, but the people within them were far from broken. The Ember Circle had come to send a message—but all they’d done was light the fire for the Crows’ revenge.

And in Doskvol, there were few things more dangerous than a crew with nothing left to lose.

News: Chaos Erupts in Doskvol: Monsters, Fire, and Death at Gaddwick Station

In the dimly lit backroom of the Twilight Lounge, Vesper, the bar's enigmatic proprietor, meticulously arranged bottles on a polished oak shelf. The room was a haven of mysterious allure, with plush furnishings and soft, ambient light creating an atmosphere of both comfort and secrecy. Thear, her sharp-eyed and observant employee, entered holding a copy of the latest Blade Chronicle.

Thear: (waving the newspaper) "Vesper, you might want to see this. It's about the nightmare at Gaddwick Station."

Vesper: (taking the newspaper with a sharp gaze) "Another headline about that catastrophe? Let me see." (She unfolded the paper, revealing a large, disturbing photo of the Crows.)

Thear: "Yes, it's a big one. Listen to this: 'DOSKVOL – In a night that will be remembered for its terror and tragedy, the once-bustling Gaddwick Station and its surrounding areas were thrown into chaos as an unprecedented attack unfolded, leaving a trail of destruction and death in its wake.'"

Vesper: (scanning the text with a scowl) "Terror and tragedy, indeed. What else does it say?"

Thear: "It describes a scene of utter chaos. 'Witnesses report a series of shocking events that began with mysterious creatures, resembling half-dead centaurs, wreaking havoc in the Night Market and beyond. These nightmarish beings, whose origins remain unknown, appeared amidst the confusion, adding to the terror experienced by those present.'"

Vesper: (grimacing) "Half-dead centaurs? That's the stuff of nightmares. What kind of horrors are these Crows conjuring up now?"

Thear: "And it gets worse. 'The initial mayhem was compounded by assailants wielding deadly fire-based weaponry. Onlookers described scenes of rampant destruction as flames engUlriced parts of the city, contributing to the mounting casualties and chaos. Among the dead is the esteemed director of Gaddwick Station, whose untimely demise has sent shockwaves through the community.'"

Vesper: (seething with anger) "This is atrocious. The Crows have to be held accountable. Their actions are a direct assault on the very fabric of our society. They've gone too far this time."

Thear: "There's also a statement from the new director. She said, 'This is a terrible tragedy, and we mourn the loss of the director, a man who dedicated his life to the betterment of Gaddwick Station. His legacy will not be forgotten, and I pledge to continue his good work, ensuring that Gaddwick Station remains a cornerstone of our community. Together, we will rebuild and honour his memory.'"

Vesper: (nodding grimly) "At least there's some attempt at stability. But the damage these monsters have done is incalculable. I can't stand the thought of those criminals walking free while the city suffers."

Thear: "The article names the suspects too. 'Jack, Harleena, Rabbit, and Harry are currently under intense scrutiny for their alleged involvement in the night's events. Their presence at key locations and reported actions have raised suspicions among the authorities and the public.'"

Vesper: (eyes narrowing) "Those names make my skin crawl. Jack and his crew are responsible for more suffering than anyone cares to admit. They've turned Doskvol into their playground for chaos

and destruction. They need to be caught and punished, and I mean thoroughly. The Crows are a blight on this city."

Thear: "It's odd, though. This article isn't by Lena Vale. It's signed by someone named Rupert Alton. I find that strange, don't you?"

Vesper: (raising an eyebrow) "Rupert Alton? I don't recall that name. Lena's usually the one covering these kinds of stories. Her absence is suspicious, especially with the gravity of this situation."

Thear: "Yes, Lena usually digs deeper. This piece feels more superficial. Maybe Rupert's just a new face trying to get some attention, but it does make you wonder."

Vesper: "It does make you wonder. If Lena's not on this, we might not be getting the full picture. Rupert might not be as thorough. But one thing's clear: the authorities need to act decisively. We can't afford to have these criminals running amok while the city crumbles."

Thear: "Absolutely. If the Crows are behind this, they need to be stopped before they cause more damage. The city's already on edge."

Vesper: (with a fierce resolve) "Thear, if you hear any rumours or whispers about their whereabouts, let me know immediately. We can't let them slip through the cracks. The Crows are a cancer on this city, and they need to be cut out before they spread any further."

Thear: "Understood. I'll keep my ears open. And I'll make sure to stay vigilant. The city's safety depends on everyone playing their part."

Vesper: "Good. We'll do everything in our power to ensure that justice is served. These monsters must be brought to account for their actions. Doskvol deserves better than the chaos they've unleashed."

As Thear returned to her duties, Vesper remained in the backroom, her thoughts filled with anger and determination. The devastation wrought by the Crows weighed heavily on her, and she knew that the city's safety and well-being depended on swift and decisive action. The uncertainty surrounding the report and the unfamiliar byline only fueled her resolve to see justice done.

Chapter 5: The Forgotten Relic - Part 1

The morning after the attack dawned grey and bitter, the sort of damp chill that crept through stone and wood alike. Inside the Crows' base, the air still carried a faint tang of smoke, mingling with the sharper scents of sawdust and cold metal. The place was far from quiet. Hammers struck wood with dull, rhythmic thuds. Nails squealed faintly under the strain of being driven into splintered beams. Somewhere in the back, a pane of glass cracked as Harry tried—and failed—to fit it back into its warped frame, muttering curses under his breath. The floor was littered with the debris of their work: blackened splinters, torn scraps of cloth, discarded nails, and small drifts of ash swept into uneven piles. Jack had gone out early, coat collar up against the drizzle, saying he knew "a few people" who might lend a hand with repairs—for a price. Rabbit suspected it was less about carpentry skill and more about muscle they could call on if trouble came knocking again. Still, Jack had been tight-lipped about the details. That was Jack's way: you didn't get the full plan until you were already knee-deep in it. Rabbit himself had been working alongside Harry since dawn, fixing whatever could be fixed without specialised tools. They had re-hung a crooked interior door, patched two jagged holes in the wall with scavenged planks, and were now clearing the burnt remains of what had once been a long table in the common room. Neither man spoke much as they worked—there wasn't much to say that hadn't already been said the night before—but the silence was thick with unspoken thoughts. From the far side of the yard, the creak of iron hinges broke through the noise. Harleena was at the front gates, tugging them open just wide enough to admit a tall figure in a dark overcoat. The man moved with a deliberate, measured pace, his eyes scanning the scorched yard and the blackened walls beyond. He carried a satchel in one hand, the worn leather bulging with supplies. "Mick Rich," Harleena greeted, voice low but even. "You must be the friend Lazarus was waiting for."

"That's right," Mick said, his tone neutral but edged with curiosity. He stepped inside, gaze lingering on the damaged facade, the splintered shutters, and the faint curls of soot still clinging to the upper walls. "What in the Saints' name happened here? When Lazarus sent for me, I thought maybe he'd taken ill. Didn't expect to walk into… this." His eyes roamed again, narrowing slightly. "Truth be told, I thought this place had been abandoned for years." Harleena's mouth twitched into something that was not quite a smile. "We bought it recently," she said simply. "Fixed it up enough to live in. The rest… is none of your concern." Mick held her gaze for a moment, clearly weighing whether to press the point. Then he gave a small nod, adjusting the strap of his satchel. "Fair enough. Show me to him."

She led him inside, her boots clicking against the soot-darkened floorboards, past Rabbit and Harry without a word. The hallway was dim, lit only by what daylight managed to filter through the grime-streaked windows. They descended to the basement, where the air grew cooler and the faint scent of antiseptic mingled with the ever-present smell of char. The makeshift medical center they'd thrown together last night was still there—a pair of cots side by side, a rickety table stacked with bandages, ointments, and chipped glass bottles. One cot held Lazarus Finch, propped up against a pillow, his face still pale but his eyes more alert than they had been hours ago. "Mick," Lazarus said, relief softening his voice. "Took you long enough."

"I came as quick as I could," Mick replied, setting his satchel down on the table with a heavy thud. "Heard you had yourself a rough night." He gave Harleena a pointed look, then turned back to his patient. "Let's see the damage." While Mick began unpacking his tools and supplies, Harleena moved to the other cot, where Jim Bob lay under a blanket. His hair was matted from smoke, and his face was drawn, but there was a spark in his eyes when he saw her.

“Harley,” he said with a faint grin. “Didn’t expect to wake up here. Thought maybe I’d died and gone to a quieter place.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easy,” she said, pulling up a stool beside him. Her voice softened. “I’m sorry, Jim. You were supposed to be healing, not getting caught up in whatever hell that was.” He gave a small shrug, wincing at the pull on his shoulders. “I’ve seen worse. You forget, I’ve been around longer than you have. This city’s never been gentle.” She hesitated, searching his face. “Still… you shouldn’t have been here for that. They came for us, not you.”

“That doesn’t matter much now, does it?” Jim Bob’s eyes flicked toward the ceiling, as if he could see the scorched beams through the floor above. “What matters is what you do next. You need any help?” Harleena shook her head immediately. “No. You need to rest. Heal.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Jim Bob said, his voice taking on a firmer edge. “I’ve got two good hands, and I’m not afraid to get them dirty. You lot clearly have a fight on your hands.” She let out a short laugh, but there was no humor in it. “Jim, you can barely sit up.”

“Maybe so. But give me a few days, and I’ll be up. You’re going to need people you can trust.” The weight of his words hung between them. Harleena looked down at her hands, the leather of her gloves scuffed and darkened from smoke. Trust was a rare thing in Doskvol—rarer still after what had happened last night. Finally, she met his gaze. “Alright. Maybe I’ll have a thing or two for you to do… once you’re back on your feet.” Jim Bob smiled faintly, as though that was all he’d been waiting to hear. “Good. I’d hate to sit around while everyone else is having all the fun.” Harleena smirked, shaking her head. “If you think this is fun, you’re madder than I thought.” From the other cot, Lazarus let out a pained chuckle, glancing at Mick as the medic began to clean and redress his burns. “He’s always been like this,” Lazarus said. “Stubborn as a brick wall. That’s why I sent for Mick—figured I’d need someone who could patch me up while I kept him from running headfirst into trouble.”

“Sounds like you’ve both got your work cut out for you,” Harleena replied, rising from the stool. “Get them stable, Mick. We’re going to need them before this is over.” Harleena lingered in the basement a moment longer after speaking with Jim Bob, her gaze flicking between him and Lazarus. Both men looked marginally better under Mick’s care, but the sight still left her with a twist in her stomach. There was a part of her that wanted to stay right there, to make sure they stayed breathing — but she heard the creak of the front door upstairs, followed by a familiar voice calling out. Jack was back. She took the steps two at a time, emerging into the common room where Rabbit and Harry were hunched over a half-repaired window frame. Jack stood just inside the doorway, shrugging off his damp coat, the drizzle from outside still clinging to his hair. He looked like he’d been walking half the city. “Found us a couple of hands,” he said without preamble. “Carpenters, sort of. More like dockside bruisers who know how to hold a hammer. They’ll come tomorrow. Until then…” He let his gaze drift over the wreckage still scattered around the base. “…we make do.”

“Figures,” Harry muttered, brushing sawdust off his sleeves. “We could use ten pairs of hands right now.”

“We could,” Jack agreed, “but unless you’ve got coin to pay them, we’ll settle for two tomorrow. They’ll work for cheap — if we don’t mind them asking questions.” Rabbit set down his hammer. “Everyone in this city asks questions. The trick is making sure they get the wrong answers.” Harleena crossed her arms, leaning against the doorway. “Speaking of questions… We need to talk about last night.” That pulled their attention. Harry straightened from the window. Jack’s expression darkened a fraction. “They knew we’d be gone,” Harleena said, her voice steady but sharp. “The Circle. Emberlash’s men didn’t just stumble into our doorstep by chance. Someone

told them we were out on a job." The room went quiet except for the faint drip of water from somewhere in the corner. "You're saying we've got a leak," Jack said finally.

"I'm saying it's damn likely." She looked between the three of them. "We've been at this long enough to know a coincidence from a setup." Rabbit spoke before anyone else could, his tone calm but edged. "Let's start with the timeline. We left here last night just before sundown. No one else knew the details of the job except us, Constant, and Lannic."

"And Adrian," Harry said immediately, almost too quickly. His eyes flicked toward Rabbit. "Don't forget him. He was hanging around the Cyphers' place, listening when he shouldn't. I don't trust him." Jack snorted. "You don't trust anyone."

"I trust you — most days," Harry shot back. "But that one? I wouldn't put it past him to sell us out for a handful of silver." Jack shook his head, but his own voice held no shortage of suspicion. "If you want my guess, it's Silas. He's too close to too many people. Always showing up in places he shouldn't be. And don't forget, the Circle's got their fingers in half the docks — Silas is a dock rat. Easy connection." Harleena's gaze sharpened. "I've got my own thoughts. And they're not going to make you happy." She let the silence draw for a moment. "I don't trust Lannic. Never have. He plays everything too close to the chest. We're assets to him, not allies. If giving the Circle our address bought him some advantage, I think he'd do it."

"That's a dangerous thing to say," Jack warned.

"It's a dangerous thing to think any of us are safe," she shot back.

Rabbit listened to all of it without interrupting, his mind already sifting through the names like an investigator lining suspects on a board. Faction connections overlapped in his head — The Ember Circle and the Gloam Sisters working together now, the Cyphers walking a razor's edge between cooperation and survival, the Crows caught in the middle. He finally spoke. "Listen. We can stand here all morning pointing fingers, but unless we've got proof, it's nothing but noise. And noise in Doskvol can get you killed. You start accusing the wrong person, they'll hear about it before you've even made it back home." Harry frowned. "So what, we do nothing?"

"No," Rabbit said firmly. "We watch. We listen. We keep our mouths shut and our eyes open. You see something that feels off, you bring it here — but you keep it between us. We don't give anyone the satisfaction of watching us tear ourselves apart." Harleena exhaled slowly, her shoulders relaxing by a hair. "Fine. But I'm not letting this go." Jack nodded, though his jaw was still tight. "We keep this quiet for now. And when we find out who it is…" He left the rest unsaid, but the meaning hung heavy in the air. Harleena leaned her hip against the table, crossing her arms. "There's too many people walking in and out of this place lately," she said, voice low but cutting. "You want to talk about leaks? It doesn't have to be one of our so-called 'allies.' Could be anyone who's been under this roof in the last week." Rabbit frowned. "Meaning?"

"Meaning Lazarus," she said plainly, though she didn't sound pleased to be saying it. "Or anyone he's brought in. This house isn't exactly a fortress. We've been letting strangers sleep under our roof, and in this city that's as good as handing them a map to slit your throat." Jack's eyes narrowed. "Careful. I've known Lazarus longer than I've known you. He's no saint, but he's not the type to sell out his own base while he's still in it."

"Maybe," Harry cut in, "but we don't know this Mick Rich. And we don't know Jim Bob, except he's lying in our basement eating our food and bleeding on our cots. And the other patients Lazarus brings in? Half of them could be Circle spies for all we know." Harleena's expression hardened. "Jim Bob's not a spy. He's… an old friend. If you knew him, you wouldn't even be saying that." Harry lifted his hands, a half-shrug in his tone. "I'm just pointing out the obvious. We're drowning in unknowns here." The air went taut for a moment. Rabbit cleared his throat

before it could turn into a real fight. “We’re not solving this by tearing chunks out of each other. Let’s stay on the same side until we actually have something.” Jack, sensing the rising edge in Harleena’s stance, stepped in to redirect. “Speaking of ‘having something,’ you should know what it’s like out there right now.” Rabbit arched a brow. “Bad?”

Jack snorted. “Worse. Every tavern, every back alley I walked past, people were talking about us. Not just in whispers. Names. Faces. They’ve plastered us across the *Blade Chronicle* like we’re some sort of bloody celebrity murderers.” Harry’s grin crept in despite himself. “Good. Means the name’s getting out. People know who we are now.” Jack didn’t return the smile. “Harry, this isn’t the kind of fame you want. They didn’t just mention us — they described the chaos at Gaddwick Station like we personally lit the fires and set the monsters loose. Painted us as the masterminds behind the whole thing.” Harleena straightened. “They *named* us?”

“Named us,” Jack confirmed grimly. “Jack, Harleena, Rabbit, Harry. Right there in ink, with descriptions and sketches. According to their ‘witness,’ we were seen fleeing the scene on multiple occasions. Coordinating the chaos, apparently.”

“That’s garbage,” Harleena snapped, her eyes flashing. “A witness in Lord Veylock’s employ? That’s not coincidence — that’s a hit piece. And I can think of at least two factions who’d pay good coin to see our faces in every paper in the city.” Jack nodded. “And the worst part? Some people believe it. I saw it in their faces. The way they looked at me when they thought I wasn’t looking. Not suspicion — certainty.” Rabbit exhaled through his nose, slow and deliberate. “Which means it’s way too hot for us out there right now. Every time we step outside, we’re rolling the dice. And sooner or later, someone’s going to cash in on the bounty, whether it’s real or just rumor.” For a moment, no one said anything. The distant hammering from upstairs filled the silence, a rhythm that sounded far too much like the ticking of a clock. Harleena broke it first, her voice low but fierce. “Then we need to fix this. We can’t hide forever. And whoever’s feeding the fire—whether it’s the Circle, the Sisters, or one of our so-called ‘friends’—we’re going to put them out.”

Rabbit’s brow furrowed at Harleena’s last words. “That might be a bit hasty,” he said, his voice calm but edged with warning. “Charging out swinging is exactly what they want. Whoever’s behind this—Circle, Sisters, or some rat slipping notes under their door—they’re expecting us to be angry. To make mistakes.” Harleena’s gaze snapped to him. “And what’s your plan, then? Sit here, lick our wounds, and hope the people burning our house down just… get bored? That’s not how predators work, Rabbit. They smell weakness, they keep coming.”

“That’s not weakness,” Rabbit countered, his tone sharpening. “That’s control. You strike when the target’s exposed, not when you’re half-blind from smoke and blood.” Harry leaned forward, a restless energy in his eyes. “Or we hit them *now* before they can plan another hit on us. I say we take the fight to them, burn *their* place to the ground.” Rabbit gave him a look like he’d just suggested walking into Ironscar with a lit torch. “That’s the fastest way to get all of us killed. This city doesn’t care who’s right. It only cares who’s left standing.” Harry shrugged, grinning faintly. “Then we just have to make sure that’s us.” Jack, who had been pacing behind them, finally spoke. “Look… I’m not saying we shouldn’t get payback. I *want* to. I want to be the crew everyone talks about. But this—” he waved a hand toward the burnt wall, the wreckage still littering the floor “—this is different. They’re not just fighting us. They’re making sure everyone knows it.”

“Exactly,” Harleena said, stabbing a finger toward him. “They’re writing the story, and we’re just sitting here letting them. I’m not letting my name rot in some gutter rag without putting a few of them in the ground.”

“Harleena,” Rabbit said, keeping his tone even, “you’re thinking like a hunter who just got her scent thrown off. You’re not tracking prey anymore—you’re walking into bait.” She let out a sharp laugh with no humor in it. “You think I can’t tell the difference?”

“I think,” Rabbit said carefully, “that wanting blood and needing victory are two different things. You can’t have both at the same time in this city.” Her jaw tightened, and for a long moment, the only sound was the slow, uneven creak of the scorched rafters above. Harry shifted in his seat like the tension was a physical weight pressing on him. Jack’s eyes darted between them, the worry in his expression thinly veiled. Finally, Harleena exhaled through her nose, the frustration still there but cooling into something harder. “Fine. You boys want to play it safe, patch walls, and have committee meetings about who might’ve ratted us out? Go ahead. I’m not sitting here stewing until my blade rusts.” She turned toward the door, snatching her coat from the peg.

“Where are you going?” Jack asked, a note of unease in his voice. “Shadows’ Den, maybe. Or to a dog shelter” she said, slipping one arm into her sleeve. “I need someone I can truly trust. I also need a drink. Maybe ten.” Rabbit’s voice followed her to the threshold. “Be careful out there.” She glanced back over her shoulder with a small, dangerous smile. “Careful’s not what I’m hoping for. I *wish* someone tried to attack me today.” And with that, she stepped out into the grey daylight, the door swinging shut behind her with a heavy thud, leaving the men in the dim, smoke-scented quiet of the ruined base.

The Shadows’ Den was half-lit and heavy with the scent of old oak, pipe smoke, and stale beer. The kind of place where the floorboards remembered every footstep and the regulars sat in the same seats night after night, as if welded there by habit. In the far corner, Harleena had claimed a booth beneath a warped window, its glass clouded from years of damp. A battered candle stub flickered between the bottles on her table, throwing uneven shadows across her face. She cradled her third drink in one hand — a glass of something sharp and amber, the kind of liquor that warmed her bones as much as it dulled the edges of her thoughts. Her rifle leaned within arm’s reach against the bench. The air was cool enough that she could see faint wisps of her breath when she exhaled near the window, but the alcohol kept a slow, simmering heat in her chest. Her mind kept circling back to the sarcastic throwaway she’d made at the door — “dog shelter” — and how, on the way here, she’d actually stopped at one. She hadn’t planned to, but the thought had lodged in her like a splinter, and when she passed the small, iron-barred building by the canal, she’d turned in without a word. Now, at her feet, the result of that detour rested with his broad head between his paws: a young Cane Corso, all muscle and alert eyes, the color of storm clouds. His cropped ears twitched at every clink of glass and shuffle of boots in the room, and when Harleena reached down to scratch along his neck, she could feel the taut readiness under his skin. There was a comfort in that — knowing that if anyone tried to catch her off guard now, they’d have to deal with both her and him.

“Not a bad choice,” she murmured to him under her breath, letting her fingers trail down to his shoulder. “You’ll eat anyone who looks at me funny, won’t you?” She took another slow sip, letting the burn spread through her. The taste was bitter, but it anchored her — something solid after the chaos of the past night. She was tired, yes, but not drained; the kind of fatigue that made her sharper, not softer. Every muscle in her was coiled, waiting for something to point all this heat toward. Her gaze swept lazily across the room out of habit. Mostly locals — faces she knew well enough to ignore. A few strangers. A card game near the bar. The Den was loud enough to mask private conversations but quiet enough to hear boots crossing the floor toward her booth. That’s when she saw him. Constant. He moved like he always did — calm, self-assured, as if the floor belonged to him. His coat was immaculate despite the weather

outside, and the faint smirk on his lips suggested he was halfway through a private joke. He came to a stop beside her table, resting one gloved hand on the chair opposite.

“You guys are getting predictable,” he said by way of greeting, his tone carrying that lazy confidence she remembered. “Always here. If I wanted to find you, I’d only need to check this place.” She didn’t bother to hide her irritation. “If you’ve got nothing worth saying, then you’ve wasted the trip,” she said flatly, taking another sip without inviting him to sit. His gaze drifted downward to the Cane Corso, who was watching him with quiet suspicion. Constant crouched slightly, producing a small biscuit from his pocket. Without asking, he held it out. The dog’s nostrils flared before he took it in one slow bite, never breaking eye contact with the man. “Good taste in company,” Constant said, straightening again. “Still… a dog can only watch your back so much. Sometimes you need people.” Her lip curled in the faintest trace of a smile — not amusement, exactly, more like a reflex at the absurdity of it. “Already married to my rifle,” she said, letting the sarcasm land heavy. “Not looking to expand the family.”

“Shame,” he replied easily, unfazed. “But I’m not here to propose. I’ve got something I need done. And I think it’s the kind of task the Crows might be interested in.” That piqued something in her, though she didn’t show it outright. She leaned back against the seat, studying him through the amber haze of her drink. The glass was warm in her hand; her thoughts sharper than they had been all day. This could be trouble. This could be exactly the kind of trouble she wanted. She tilted her head, letting the candlelight catch the hard line of her jaw. “Then talk. Or leave. I’m not in the mood for foreplay.” Constant didn’t move at first, only let that thin smirk hang in the space between them. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, he slid into the seat across from her. The chair gave a faint groan under his weight. His gloved hands rested on the table for a moment before he reached for the glass he’d been nursing — the amber catching the candlelight like molten gold. “I read the Chronicle this morning,” he said, voice smooth but with a bite of amusement under it. “They’ve got your names printed nice and bold. Pictures too. Must be a thrill.” Harleena’s fingers drummed against her glass, each tap soft but impatient. “A thrill? Try a noose. That exposé’s made walking the streets a coin toss between whispers and a knife in the ribs.”

“I can see how that might get inconvenient,” Constant said, swirling the liquid in his glass. “Any idea who fed them the story?” She leaned back, studying him. “Could be anyone. Too many mouths moving around our place lately. The Gloam Sisters, the Ember Circle… pick a snake, they’re all in the same pit. What matters is someone made sure we were painted as monsters, and I don’t like being anyone’s villain unless I’m the one writing the story.” He gave a quiet chuckle, but his eyes stayed sharp. “Spoken like a true predator.” She ignored the compliment — if it even was one — and took a slow sip, letting the liquor roll over her tongue. “We need work. Something profitable enough to patch what they broke, but not the kind of job that has every faction sniffing around.” Constant’s gaze flicked down to the Cane Corso by her feet, still watching him like a sentry. “And you want it clean.”

“I want it quiet,” she corrected. He leaned in slightly, lowering his voice so it was just for her. “Then I might have exactly what you’re looking for. There’s a relic out in the Deadland Woods — old, powerful, worth more than most gangs make in a year. I’ve tried to get it before… came back with nothing but scratches and bad dreams. But with your skill set, and maybe your crew, I think we can manage it.” Harleena tilted her head, curiosity flickering past the practiced mask. “What’s the catch?” His smirk returned, smaller this time, almost conspiratorial. “The catch is getting in and out without waking the wrong things. The place is sealed with wards — the kind you don’t trip unless you want every spirit for miles breathing down your neck. Not to mention whatever’s guarding it now.” She let the silence stretch, eyes narrowing just enough to read his face. Constant never brought anything to the table without layers, and there was no question this relic had strings attached. But relics also meant coin. Coin meant leverage. And leverage was exactly what the Crows needed.

Her fingers idly traced the rim of her glass. “You’re going to have to give me more than a campfire story, Constant. What exactly are we walking into? And what’s so special about this thing you’re after?” His gaze flicked past her for a moment, scanning the room out of old habit, before he leaned in across the table. The pub’s light caught the faint scar above his right eyebrow, and for the first time since sitting down, the usual smugness in his voice softened. “It’s called the Umbral Ring,” he said quietly, as if speaking the name too loudly might summon something from the shadows. “Heavy, golden… forged from a metal no one’s ever been able to name, let alone melt. From the ring hang five dagger-like needles, each on its own short gold chain. And in the center, a pyramid marked with an eye that… shifts, when you’re not looking straight at it.” Harleena raised an eyebrow. “Sounds charming.”

“It hums with electroplasm,” Constant continued, ignoring her sarcasm. “Even ghosts keep their distance. Warm to the touch, smells like incense and grave dirt. The last time it was seen in Doskvol was sixty years ago, before it vanished. Most think it’s just a ghost story now.”

“And you don’t,” she said flatly. “I know it’s real. And I know where it is — deep in the Deadland Woods. That whole stretch is walled in by old wards and older spirits. It’s… a place of death. Whatever lives there now doesn’t welcome guests.” Harleena took a slow sip, eyes still on him. “So why risk your neck for it?” For a moment, he didn’t answer. When he did, his voice had none of its usual easy rhythm. “Because I’ve failed before. Years ago, I tried to bring my mother back from the grave. In my desperation, I made a bargain with demons.” He gave a humorless laugh. “They’re predictable liars. Instead of my mother, I bound my little sister’s soul to them. Condemned her. I’ve been searching for a way to break that curse ever since.” Her expression didn’t change, but she studied him with that sharp, measuring look she reserved for men who claimed to be desperate. “And you think this ring will do it?”

“I know it will,” he said, leaning back slightly but keeping his eyes locked on hers. “One use — that’s all I need. You help me retrieve it, I free her, and then the Ring is yours. I don’t care if you keep it, sell it, or throw it into the Void Sea.” She let the words hang between them, weighing his tone, the way his hands tightened slightly around his glass. “What’s the real catch?”

“The woods,” Constant said without hesitation. “They don’t just have spirits. There are things out there that never had names. Creatures older than the city, things that thrive on fear. And the wards… they don’t just keep intruders out, they test them. Fail, and the woods keep you. Forever.” Her lips curved into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “You make it sound like a date.”

“Then wear something sharp,” he replied. She leaned back in her chair, swirling the last of her drink. “If I say yes, it’s because this sounds like something my people can handle. But Constant—” her voice dropped into a blade’s edge “—if you cross me, I’ll make sure you join whatever’s haunting those trees.” He nodded, almost like he respected the promise. “Fair enough.”

The city thinned around them as the four Crows made their way through the damp streets, the cobblestones giving way to cracked, moss-lined flagstones. Ahead, past the last rows of sagging brick buildings and shuttered windows, the bridge rose — black iron and riveted plates — spanning the slow, dark ribbon of water that marked the boundary between Doskvol and the wild edge of the Lost District. Beyond that lay the Deadland Woods, a jagged silhouette against the misted horizon. Harry kept pace near the rear, his boots scuffing against loose gravel, but his mind wasn’t on the path ahead. He was still turning over the conversation Harleena had with the crew three nights ago, the one where she’d explained the “opportunity”

Constant had offered her. She'd spoken about the Umbral Ring like it was the key to everything — coin, power, leverage. Said Constant had a personal reason for wanting it, something about a curse and a sister's soul. And just like that, it was a done deal. They'd go into the Deadlands, get the ring, help the man, and then keep the prize. Harry still couldn't decide what bothered him more — the fact that Harleena, the one who stormed out of the base spitting fire about traitors and leaks, was now blind-trusting this Conrad Rian, or the way she'd recounted his story without the slightest suspicion. She'd spoken like she believed every word. Like Constant had earned some pass the rest of them never got.

It gnawed at him. Not just the trust — the magic. Constant had a reputation, and Harry knew magic when he saw it. That shimmer he'd cast over the convoy before it vanished, the casual precision of it… Harry could do magic too. More than people thought. More than some even gave him credit for. And he'd prove it. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But soon enough, they'd all see he was every bit as powerful — maybe more — than Constant bloody Ryan. The wind carried the faint, briny tang of the Void Sea, mixing with the smell of damp earth as they crossed the bridge. The bridge's creak underfoot seemed louder out here, each step taking them further from the safety of crowds and deeper into that uneasy space where the city ended and the unknown began. He was so wrapped in his thoughts he didn't notice how close he'd drifted to Harleena's new shadow — the Cane Corso she'd picked up on her way to the pub that day. A slab of muscle wrapped in dark brindled fur, eyes like polished amber, and a jaw that could probably snap bone without effort. The growl was low, almost a vibration, but it snapped Harry out of his head quick enough. He stepped back sharply, hands raised. The dog didn't lunge, didn't bark, just kept those eyes on him, unblinking. Harry muttered something under his breath and fell a step behind, glancing at Harleena, who didn't even look down at the animal — just reached absently to scratch its neck, as if the exchange hadn't happened. He didn't get it. Why keep the thing? Sure, it was big. Intimidating. But it wasn't exactly friendly, and Harry had a feeling it wasn't just him the dog had judged. He could almost hear it in his head — the unspoken warning in that growl. Maybe after this job he'd get his own. Something loyal, something that didn't look at him like he was dinner waiting to happen. If Harleena got a pet, why shouldn't he?

The buildings behind them were little more than black silhouettes now, jagged and crumbling against the pale morning haze. Out here, the noise of Doskvol was gone — no hawkers calling from stalls, no clatter of wheels on cobbles, just the soft hiss of wind pushing through the skeletal remains of trees. Ahead, the ground fell away into a narrow, beaten path that cut straight toward the Deadland Woods, the treeline hunched and gnarled like a wall of black teeth. Harleena stopped just short of where the last tufts of stubborn grass gave way to bare, cracked earth. "This is it," she said, her voice carrying in the stillness. "The place Conrad said he'd meet us." Harry glanced at the sun, squinting through the low haze. It hovered just above the eastern rooftops, burning pale and cold through the mist — close enough to the hour Constant had promised. He frowned. "If he's going to show, it should be now." Rabbit shifted his weight, scanning the shadows under the trees. "Maybe he's inside already. Testing us." But Harleena's eyes caught something before anyone else's — a figure leaning against the broad trunk of a twisted oak, half-swallowed by its shade. She started forward without hesitation, the Cane Corso padding silently at her side, its head level with her hip. The man barely moved as she approached. Constant was exactly as Harry remembered — tall, sharp in the way a knife is sharp, his coat hanging loose over lean muscle. The faint curl of cigarette smoke wound upward from his fingers, mixing with the damp air.

"Morning," Harleena said, stopping just close enough to catch the faint glint in his eyes. Constant smiled as if they'd met in a far friendlier place than this. "Right on time. You lot always this punctual?" Jack gave a small, humorless smirk. "When we want to be." Constant's gaze swept over them — Jack, Rabbit, Harry — lingering just long enough to weigh each one. Then he flicked his cigarette away, grinding the ember into the dirt beneath his boot. "Before we go

any further… I'm going to ask you one last time. The Deadland Woods aren't just dangerous. They're death. Spirits, wards, things you can't see until they're on you. If you step in there with me, there's no halfway. You're in until we have the Ring or you're in the ground. Do we understand each other?" Harry felt the weight of it — not just the words, but the way Constant's tone stripped away any sense of casual bravado. This wasn't a street fight or a job gone sideways. This was walking willingly into a place built to consume you. One by one, the Crows nodded. Rabbit's was curt, almost defiant. Jack's had the air of a man making a calculated gamble. Harleena's was steady, certain, with the faintest flicker of anticipation behind her eyes. Harry's own came last — deliberate, because if Constant thought he was hesitating, he'd be wrong. "Good," Constant said simply. He straightened from the tree, pulling his coat tighter as he turned toward the path. "Then let's walk." And just like that, they crossed the invisible line where Doskvol ended and the Deadlands began. The trees closed around them almost immediately, blotting out more of the sky with every step. The air was cooler here, heavy with the scent of wet soil and something older — the dry, cloying note of incense and grave dust, faint but constant, as if the forest itself exhaled it. The city sounds were gone. All that remained was the crunch of their boots, the slow pant of the dog, and the knowledge that whatever waited deeper in the woods, it had been waiting a long time.

The path into the Deadlands was no real path at all — just the suggestion of one, worn by things that walked on two legs and four, long before the Crows ever thought to cross this threshold. Harry kept a few paces behind Harleena, the dog padding at her side like it had been born for this place. It was big, dark, muscle under fur, ears pricked for sounds Harry couldn't yet hear. The woods swallowed them quickly. Branches curled overhead in a woven lattice that strangled the sunlight, and every step seemed to pull the air tighter around them. It was cooler here, but the kind of cool that bit at the skin — damp, clinging, almost sour in the lungs. Rabbit walked with his hands buried in his coat pockets, shoulders hunched like the forest's weight sat directly on them. He wasn't saying much, which for Rabbit meant his mind was spinning fast. Calculations. Contingencies. Suspect lists that didn't yet have names written in ink.

Jack tried to keep it light, muttering the occasional joke under his breath, but his voice carried strange in this place — thin, like the trees ate the sound before it could reach anyone's ears. Constant moved with the quiet ease of someone who'd been here before, eyes flicking to things the rest of them missed — a break in the moss, a hollowed knot in a tree, a patch of earth that looked too smooth to be natural. And Harleena… she looked like she belonged here. Chin up, gaze scanning ahead, one hand brushing the rifle slung across her back. The dog's leash hung loose in her grip, but the animal stayed close, steps matched to hers. Harry's own stomach was tightening with every step. It wasn't just the gloom or the smell — that faint thread of incense and scorched dirt that wound through the air — it was the way the light itself felt wrong. The deeper they went, the faster it seemed to bleed away. The sun was still up; he could feel it somewhere above the canopy. But the shadows here moved differently, stretching across the ground like they were reaching, curling into shapes that didn't match the trees casting them. "Feels like walking into a tomb," Harry muttered. "That's because it is," Constant said without looking back. "The Deadlands aren't a forest. They're a graveyard that forgot to lie still."

"Cheerful," Jack murmured. "It's not supposed to be cheerful," Harleena replied. Her voice carried a steady edge, like she wanted to cut off the banter before it dulled their focus. The dog gave a low, steady growl, hackles rising at something Harry couldn't see. He instinctively stepped closer to Harleena, earning himself a sharp glare from the animal and a curl of its lips. Harry stepped back quickly, irritation prickling under his skin. *Great. Even the mutt doesn't like me.* He told himself it didn't matter — the dog wouldn't be the one casting spells if things went bad — but the thought stuck, festering. Maybe after this job he'd get his own companion, something loyal and dangerous, something that wouldn't look at him like he was trespassing. They pushed on, boots crunching through old leaves and soft soil. The silence was a living thing now, pressing at the edges of their hearing until every tiny sound seemed magnified — the snap

of a twig, the whisper of a branch shifting overhead, the dog's breathing. Harry's eyes kept sliding to the side, catching glimpses of movement between the trunks — slivers of shadow that slipped away when he tried to focus on them. He told himself it was tricks of the light. Then he told himself he didn't believe that.

Constant raised a hand, slowing their pace. "We're close to something," he said. "Not the Ring. But something." The trees broke a moment later, spilling them into a clearing no bigger than a tavern common room. The ground here was bare except for a single fire pit, its blackened stones still holding the faint heat of a recent flame. A worn sleeping bag lay beside it, half-zipped, a dent in the fabric where someone's body had lain. No one was here now. Harry scanned the treeline. The shadows there felt thicker, like they were leaning in to watch. "Someone was here," he said quietly. "Still might be," Rabbit added, eyes darting between the trees. Harleena crouched by the fire pit, running her fingers just above the stones. "Warm," she confirmed. She looked at Constant. "Friend of yours?" He shook his head slowly. "Not mine. But they know these woods." His tone carried no reassurance — just the simple truth that whoever had camped here was no amateur. The dog's growl deepened, rolling out like a warning.

Harry's gaze stayed fixed on Constant when the man said, *"Not mine. But they know these woods."* It wasn't just the words — it was the certainty. There was no hesitation, no "maybe," no "I think." The way Constant spoke, it was as if he already knew the kind of person who'd made this camp, maybe even what they'd eaten for breakfast. Harry narrowed his eyes. "What does that even mean?" Constant straightened from where he'd been scanning the treeline, brushing ash from his fingers like it was nothing. "It means we're not the only ones who know how to move where people don't see. Doskvol's full of ghosts, and not all of them are dead." Rabbit's head tilted. "Cryptic. You gonna tell us, or just leave it hanging in the air like one of your bad omens?" A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Constant's mouth. "They call themselves the Unseen. You've probably walked right past them more than once. They hide in plain sight — homeless, drunks, gutter trash… the kind of people everyone ignores. That's their camouflage. And in that disguise, they see everything, go everywhere, take what they want, and slip back into the cracks before anyone even knows it's gone." Harleena straightened from the fire pit, brushing dirt from her gloves. "Sounds like a crew."

"A crew, sure," Constant said, his tone flattening. "But they're not your run-of-the-mill scavs. They've got a leader — Jackie Comber. 'The Mist.' Rumor says he can see the future. Knows where you're going to be before you take the first step. Devil-pact, if you believe the whispers. And a gang of shadows at his back. The kind that don't always need light to exist." Jack gave a short laugh, but it was thin. "Sounds like bedtime stories to keep scavs from picking the wrong pockets."

"They're real," Constant said, voice clipped. "And if one of them's here, it's not by accident." Harry studied him, jaw tightening. *If they're shadows, how the hell does he know so much about them?* He could feel the question burning on his tongue, and finally, he let it slip. "Funny, for someone who says they vanish without a trace, you seem to have their whole biography. Why is that, Constant?" The man's expression didn't change, but something behind his eyes went colder. He didn't answer. Just turned his head toward the trees, scanning them again like the conversation was already over. Harry waited, frustration clawing at his gut. Nobody else seemed to notice, or maybe they were just pretending not to. Harleena checked the sleeping bag again. Rabbit crouched low, dragging a finger through the ash of the fire. Jack paced a slow circle, eyes darting over the treeline. "So, you're telling me these Unseen walk around Doskvol… what? Invisible?" Jack asked. "Not invisible," Constant replied. "Ignored. Which is better. You can still cast a shadow, still breathe down someone's neck, still hold a knife to their ribs if you need to." Harry's mind worked through the pieces. "Márcio," he said suddenly. Rabbit glanced over. "What about him?"

“Think about it. Showing up in strange places. Always knowing what to say. Maybe he was one of them.”

Harleena’s brow furrowed. “Who is Márcio?”

Jack frowned, half talking to himself. “Then why free Merrow Valesque? Why use us for it? If they’re as good at staying unseen as you say, wouldn’t they have their own way in?” Constant’s smirk came back, sharper this time. “Maybe they just like the name ‘the Crows.’ Has a nice ring to it. Mysterious. Dangerous. Good for telling stories about in the shadows.”

Harry opened his mouth to fire back — but the words died in his throat. A faint hiss split the air, followed by a sharp *thunk*. A thick bolt quivered in the dirt inches from Rabbit’s boot, the steel tip buried deep enough to make the wood shaft hum. Rabbit froze mid-crouch, his eyes locked on the missile. The dog at Harleena’s side gave a sharp, deep bark, teeth bared toward the treeline. The clearing felt suddenly smaller, the trees closer, their shadows heavier. No one said a word. From the gloom between two leaning pines, a figure detached itself — slow, deliberate, like it had always been part of the trees and simply decided to stop pretending. Harry noticed the way the man’s outline didn’t quite match the raggedness of his clothes. The coat was threadbare, yes, the hems frayed and the cuffs darkened with dirt, but his steps were balanced and quiet, the gait of someone who *meant* every movement. His boots barely crunched on the leaf litter. No wasted sound. No wasted motion. Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. This wasn’t some random drifter.

Beside him, Constant flicked ash from the end of his cigarette, his tone calm but carrying something sharper beneath it. “Talk of the devil.” The smoke curled away, immediately swallowed by the heavy air. The stranger stopped at the edge of the clearing, right where the dappled light gave way to shadow. His face was partially hidden under a pulled-down hood, but Harry caught the glint of sharp eyes assessing them one by one. “What are you doing here?” Jack stepped forward just enough to put himself in front. His voice was smooth, casual in a way that made Harry think of a man bluffing at cards. “Passing through.” The man’s head tilted slightly, his gaze heavy and unreadable. “Passing through,” he repeated, rolling the words in his mouth like he was testing the taste of them. Harry could feel the disbelief in his tone, quiet but solid, like the man had already decided they were lying. Harry’s patience frayed. His voice came out harder than he’d meant. “You one of the Unseen?” The man didn’t answer right away. His eyes slid over to Harry, and in that look was a flicker of something — not surprise exactly, but recognition. The kind that said *you’re asking the right question, but you don’t know how close you’re standing to the answer*. Harry took a step forward despite the low growl rumbling from Harleena’s cane corso. “You dress just like that Márcio guy. Same coat. Same way you move. You’ve got to be one of them.” For a second, Harry thought the man might just turn away. But then the faintest curve touched the stranger’s lips. “And you must be the Crows, then.” Harry’s chest tightened. He didn’t like it — the way the man said it, like the name carried weight, like it meant something more than they intended. He shot a glance to Harleena, but her face was unreadable. Constant took a step forward, voice low but cutting. “If you know who we are, then you know what we’re looking for.” The man’s attention flicked briefly to Constant, measuring him, then back to the group. “I might. But I also know you might not like what you find in the Deadland Woods.” Rabbit shifted his stance, still keeping a careful distance. “We can keep going without a fight, right?” Harleena’s voice was steady when she answered. “We’re not here to fight the Unseen. You’re not my enemy.”

The man gave the barest exhale of what might have been amusement. “If I intended to fight you, you’d never see me.” His eyes narrowed, a shadow slipping across his expression. “And no — I won’t stand in your way. But since you’ve come all the way out here…” He let the pause drag just long enough for the forest to fill it with its unnatural quiet. “…you might as well say goodbye to an old friend.” That landed like a stone in Harry’s gut. He exchanged a glance with

Rabbit, who looked just as thrown. *An old friend? Out here?* There was only one name that fit in Harry's mind, and the thought made his stomach tighten. "You'll see," the man said, already turning toward the wall of trees behind him. Without another word, he slipped into the shadows, his boots making almost no sound on the damp soil. Harleena's dog padded after him immediately, muscles taut, head low, like it knew this was no ordinary stranger. Harry fell in line with the others, but his thoughts wouldn't quiet. The man's composure, the way he seemed to know them, the fact that Constant hadn't looked surprised — it all stank. And the worst part? No one else seemed to be thinking the same way. The clearing fell away behind them, the sleeping bag and cold fire pit swallowed by the trees. The light thinned, and with every step, Harry felt the sensation deepen — that they weren't just following this man. They were being led somewhere. Somewhere he wasn't sure they'd want to be.

The path the stranger took was nothing like the direct line Constant had been guiding them toward. It veered hard into the trees, deeper into the gloom, a direction that made Harry's gut knot. Every step seemed to pull them further from their original course, and yet the man walked without hesitation, as though he had mapped every root and shadow in his mind. Harry closed the gap between them, his boots squelching softly in the damp soil. "Who are you really?" he asked, low but insistent. "What's your connection to Márcio?" The man didn't slow, his shoulders rolling with the same easy, controlled stride. "Names don't matter in the woods," he said, the words slippery as smoke. "Connections are just lines. They bend. They break." Harry narrowed his eyes. "You with the Unseen?" A pause. Not long, but enough to feel deliberate. "We walk where others don't look," the man said at last. "That's all." Frustration flared in Harry's chest. "And Márcio? You working with him?"

"That depends," the man said, voice as flat as wet stone, "on what you think 'working with' means." Harry almost pushed again, but they'd come to a natural break in the trees, a dip in the earth where the ground was littered with damp leaves. There, in the center, a crude shelter leaned against the slope—branches and broad leaves lashed together in a rough, triangular frame. It looked hastily built, like someone had made it in the dark and in a hurry, meant to keep rain off more than anything else.

But it wasn't the shelter that made Harry's steps falter.

Around it stood three figures—human in outline, but nothing about them *was* human. They were made of shadow so thick it felt *physical*, like ink in water. Their edges bled and curled, as though resisting the shape they wore. Even in the gloom, Harry could see the faint, impossible glint of two small white points in each face, locked on the group with the stillness of predators who didn't need to blink. Harry's pulse spiked. The stories he'd heard as a child came flooding back—tales whispered by older kids, about shadow demons from the far side of the world. Oni in the shape of men. Hunters who came when the lamps went out and took those foolish enough to wander the alleys alone. He'd laughed at them back then, like every kid did. But now, seeing them in the dim, broken light of the Deadlands… he felt a chill crawl through him. They didn't move, not so much as a twitch, yet their presence pressed in, thick and smothering. Even the sound of the forest felt dampened here, as if the air itself didn't want to disturb them. The faint flicker of Constant's cigarette glow made them stutter strangely, as though the light itself rejected their existence. Inside the shelter, on a bed of woven grass and scattered blankets, Márcio Keel lay curled under a filthy coat. His face was pale and slick with sweat, his breathing shallow but ragged. He coughed into his fist, the sound wet and strained, then slowly lifted his head. When his eyes found Jack, Rabbit, and Harry, a faint, crooked smile tugged at his lips. "Took you long enough," he rasped, voice cracking like dry wood. Harry froze. The man they'd all thought gone—or at least far from here—was staring right at them from a deathbed in the middle of the Deadlands, guarded by nightmares out of a child's terror. For a moment, none of them spoke. None of them *could*. The dog at Harleena's side gave a low, uncertain whine. In that suspended moment, Harry felt a hundred questions clawing for his tongue, but none of

them seemed big enough for what he was seeing. All he could do was watch, and feel the weight of the shadows pressing closer.

The silence stretched like a taut wire, heavy enough to hum. One of the Shadewraith Clan broke it—not with sound, but with motion so fluid it made Harry's stomach knot. The thing dropped into a low crouch beside Márcio, shadow-flesh bending like smoke in water, and with a care that jarred against its predatory stillness, it eased him upright. Gentle as a nurse. Tender, even.

Harry's eyes locked on the creature's hands—if you could call them that—as they supported Márcio's shoulders. There were no fingers, no nails, just tapering smears of darkness molded into the *idea* of hands, strong enough to hold him without shaking. The moment should have been calming, but the fear stayed lodged in Harry's gut, because no matter how softly they moved, at least one of those white-dot gazes was always fixed on the Crows. Watching. Measuring. Waiting. Márcio coughed into a rag, the sound wet and rattling. When he pulled the cloth away, a smear of deep, rust-red marked the fabric. Blood. Harleena, crouching a little to see his face, broke the tension first. "You okay?" Márcio gave her a wry smile that looked more like an exhausted grimace. "No," he said simply.

Jack stepped forward, voice taut. "Last time we saw you, you were staying behind in some secret prison under the governor's house while *we* freed the terror of Doskvol from his death roll." Márcio's eyes narrowed slightly, though the curve of his mouth didn't change. "You mean Merrow Valesque." His voice rasped as he shifted, leaning back against the shelter's crooked support. "I told you in my note—*I'm sorry it had to be this way, but you will understand soon.*" His gaze flicked between them. "I wrote that. I sent it. Along with your payment." The Crows didn't answer. They just stood there, the unspoken weight of *Then explain* hanging in the cool air. Márcio drew in a slow breath, then another, as if ordering his words before the coughing fit returned. "It was destiny," he said at last. "Destiny brought you together. But destiny also could not allow Merrow to die. Not yet." Harry felt his jaw tighten. The word *destiny* already set his teeth on edge. "Merrow and his Royal Family…" Márcio's voice thinned, but he pushed on, "…nearly destroyed Doskvol. Terrorist attacks. Chaos in the streets. They're not like other criminals—don't care about coin, don't care about territory. They just want to watch it all burn." In Harry's mind, the name conjured ugly flashes—stories from the papers, rumors traded in taverns. Buildings turned to cinders. Crowds stampeded into canals. "It took something… unnatural to stop them," Márcio went on. "A strange alliance—The Gloam Sisters. The Ember Circle. And the Imperial Police." Jack gave a sharp, skeptical snort. "Two criminal factions and the law, working together?"

"Yes," Márcio said flatly. "And it worked. After a daring maneuver, they finally brought him down. An ambitious young officer, Morian Ishtar, earned his captain's stripes that day. The whole city exhaled when Merrow was sentenced to the death roll." Márcio paused then, looking past them, into some shadow of memory. His voice dropped lower. "But Merrow has a secret. One the Unseen have… foreseen." Harry caught that word like a hook in his ribs—*foreseen*—and it made him glance toward the man who'd led them here. Still no expression, no clue. Just silence. The fire in Harry's chest burned hotter. This wasn't adding up, and he didn't like how easily the others seemed to be letting it wash over them.

The air inside the little clearing felt heavier now, as if the trees themselves had leaned closer to listen. The smoke from the dying campfire twisted lazily upward, its faint warmth barely reaching the circle of shadow where the Crows stood with Constant, the three silent, pale-eyed Shadewraith Clan standing like obsidian statues. Harleena broke the silence, her voice steady but laced with something sharper beneath. "I don't understand, Márcio," she said. "You're telling us destiny wanted Merrow alive… but you're not telling me *why*. What does that even mean?" Márcio shifted in the makeshift shelter, the leafy branches above him rattling faintly as one of

the Shadewraith Clan adjusted its position beside him. His eyes found hers, clear despite the fever haze. “It means,” he said, “that Comber saw something. A vision.”

“Comber,” Harleena repeated slowly, like tasting a bitter word. “My leader,” Márcio confirmed. “Jackie Comber. The Mist. You’ve heard of him.” His voice was softer now, but it carried, as though every syllable knew it was meant to be remembered. “He saw a town—maybe this one, maybe another—gone. Not in a blast, not in a storm. Gone in the quiet hours, while its people slept. Men, women, children. Every living thing. All rotting from the inside out.” Harry felt his skin prickle. The man’s tone left no room for metaphor. “Biochemical,” Márcio continued. “A weapon. And the spark that starts the fire… is Merrow Valesque’s death.” Jack frowned, brows knitting. “You’re saying if Merrow dies, *that* happens? How does that even work?” Márcio coughed hard, bent slightly forward, the Shadewraith Clan steadying him with those liquid-shadow arms. When he lifted his head, there was blood on his lip. “Because if he’s executed, the only chance of stopping it dies with him.” Jack’s frown deepened. “And that would be…?”

“Ladher,” Márcio said. The name seemed to curdle the air around them. “A virus. Weaponized. Developed—no, *discovered*—by Merrow himself. Stolen from a man named Dr. Coleman. Coleman was working under… special circumstances. And then he vanished. Completely. Nobody can find him—not Comber, not the Unseen, not even the futures Comber sees. He’s gone somewhere no eyes can reach.” Harleena leaned in slightly, her face unreadable. “And Merrow knows where.”

“The only one who does,” Márcio confirmed. “So we needed him alive. At *any* cost. Get him to talk. Get Coleman. And from him, a cure. If Merrow dies before we find Coleman… Doskvol, and maybe more, will be living on borrowed time.” Harry’s voice cut in, sharp with suspicion. “What does this virus even do?” Márcio’s gaze shifted to him, and for a heartbeat Harry swore there was pity in it. “It eats you,” Márcio said simply. “From the inside out. Veins first, like a rot creeping under your skin. Then your organs. Your brain goes last.” Harry’s stomach knotted. “You’ve seen it?” Márcio gave a dry, humorless laugh. “I’m *feeling* it.” He lifted the blood-stained rag for them to see again. “This… this is just a diluted strain. A taste of what the real thing does. I’ve got hours, maybe less.” The words hit like a cold wind through the clearing. “Merrow did this to you?” Harleena asked, voice low. Márcio’s gaze dropped. “Some questions,” he said after a pause, “aren’t worth the answer.” The fire popped softly in the silence that followed, the smell of smoke and damp earth mixing with something acrid Harry couldn’t quite name. In his mind, though, the words stayed fixed, echoing over and over: *if Merrow dies, the cure dies with him.*

The conversation hung in the damp air, the fire’s smoke curling in thin threads around the edges of the clearing. Constant shifted his weight, his gaze fixed on Márcio. “How,” Constant asked finally, “did you get yourself from a secret prison under the Governor’s House to the middle of the godsdamned Deadlands?” Márcio’s lips twitched into something that wasn’t quite a smile but carried the ghost of one. His fevered eyes slid past Constant and landed on Jack. “Thanks to *Jack "the Boy"* here.” Jack blinked, brow furrowing. “Me? I don’t—”

“You remember the bounty hunter you left behind?” Márcio said, voice rasping. There was a flicker in Jack’s expression—annoyance, wariness, maybe guilt. “…Bruce Wallunde.” Márcio nodded slowly. “He was arrested after that mess. Ended up in a cell right beside mine. Memory scrambled—someone did a real number on him—but one thing stuck. Just one. *‘Those guys from Crow’s Ward.’*” His grin was faint but there. “You’re harder to forget than you think.” Harry’s stomach turned. There was something deeply unsettling about the thought of that man—broken memory, single-minded grudge—lingering out there in the dark. Márcio leaned back slightly, every movement stiff. “He escaped. Took me with him, though I doubt he even knew why. Instinct, maybe. Or fate. Either way… he’s vowed revenge. Against *you lot*.” Jack’s jaw tightened, but before he could speak, Márcio lifted a hand. “But fear not. He’s not a problem. Not for long. When your paths cross again—and they will—it’ll be resolved in your favour. Destiny’s

already written that part." It should have sounded comforting, but the way he said it made Harry feel colder. Márcio's voice faltered after that. His breathing grew shallower, and one of the Shadewraith Clan—the one closest to his head—shifted, its formless arm making a small, deliberate motion. A gesture. *Go.* Rabbit stepped forward instead. "No. We're taking him with us. We've got a medical center—" His tone was firm, almost pleading. "We can save him." Márcio met his eyes and shook his head. "That's not what will happen."

"Then at least…" Rabbit hesitated, his voice cracking just enough to betray the weight of the moment. "At least let me bury you. Don't just disappear out here." The Shadewraith Clan were still as carved stone, their pale eyes watching without blinking. Márcio gave a slow nod. "I'll arrange it. You'll have the body. I'll see to it you find me at your hideout." Rabbit's jaw clenched. "I'll study the Ladher in you. I'll try to stop it." Márcio smiled faintly at that, and for the first time since they'd arrived, it looked almost genuine. "I'm sure of it. If anyone can, it's the Crows." No one said anything else. Even the fire seemed to burn quieter. Then, as if the moment itself had reached its limit, the Shadewraith Clan shifted—not pushing, not rushing, just *moving*—and the path ahead seemed to reappear through the trees. Harleena adjusted her coat, Constant tugged his cigarette from his lips, Jack rolled his shoulders like he was trying to shrug off something heavy. And just like that, they turned and continued their journey, leaving the shelter, the dying man, and his silent wardens behind.

Chapter 6: The Forgotten Relic - Part 2

The forest seemed to grow thicker the moment they left the clearing where Márcio lay dying. Even with the midday light filtering through the branches, the air felt heavier, as though each step took them deeper into something ancient and watching. The Crows walked in a loose line behind Constant, their boots crunching over damp leaves and twigs. No one spoke for the first hundred paces — perhaps out of respect for the dying man they'd just left, or perhaps because they were each wrestling with the weight of what he had revealed. Harry's eyes kept drifting back over his shoulder. Every time he did, he swore he saw movement where there should be none — a flicker between the trunks, a shadow ducking out of sight before his gaze could pin it down. He tried to listen past the rhythmic jingle of gear and the soft panting of Harleena's dog, but the forest swallowed sound in strange ways. Sometimes it was too quiet, so still it was suffocating; other times, the wind would stir just enough to carry a whisper, too faint to tell if it came from a branch creaking or from something breathing. Rabbit broke the silence first. "If what Márcio said is true… then freeing Merrow wasn't just reckless — it was a necessity." His voice was low, but firm, as though convincing himself as much as the others.

"Or," Jack countered, hands deep in his coat pockets, "it's just what we were meant to think. We didn't know who he was working for, and we didn't ask enough questions at the time." Constant didn't look back, but his voice carried easily. "Sometimes you don't get the luxury of asking questions. Sometimes destiny just kicks down your door, and you either move with it or get buried under it." Harry narrowed his eyes at Constant's back. The man's calm certainty made his skin itch. He thought again about how easily Constant had rattled off information about the Unseen — a gang that most people didn't even believe was real — and how none of the others had pressed him on it. Harry kept that to himself for now, but the mistrust stayed lodged in his chest like a splinter. Harleena glanced at him. "You're quiet, Harry. Thinking, or sulking?"

He gave a short, humorless laugh. "Thinking. About how all this hangs on a virus nobody can see and a maniac who just happens to be the only one who can stop it. Feels a bit… convenient, don't you think?" Her expression stayed unreadable for a moment. "Convenient or not, if it's true, it's worth the risk." Before Harry could reply, the dog — the hulking black Cane Corso Harleena had decided they "needed" — suddenly slowed its pace. Its ears pricked, head turning toward the treeline. A low growl rippled out of its throat, deep enough for Harry to feel in his ribs. He looked where it was staring and saw nothing… but for half a heartbeat, he thought the shadows between two pines weren't quite where they should be. He glanced back again a few minutes later and saw something stranger: a faint trace of movement, like the sway of hair too vivid in color for the dim forest, a flash of red that vanished before he could blink. He turned his head sharply, but there was nothing — only the tight knot of trees, and the sense that they were closing in behind them. Jack must have noticed him looking. "Seeing ghosts already?" he muttered, half amused, half wary.

"Not ghosts," Harry said, and immediately wished he'd kept his mouth shut, because he didn't have anything to follow it up with that wouldn't sound insane. He just knew the feeling in his gut — the same feeling he'd had the moment before a rooftop ambush or the second before a pistol shot rang out. They were being tracked. Not followed in the clumsy, human way, but shadowed, as if the forest itself had sent eyes and ears to watch them. Rabbit noticed the tension in his voice and glanced over his shoulder. "We're near the Ring's hiding place. Could be the wards Constant mentioned are… testing us." Constant gave the faintest smirk. "Or maybe the forest just doesn't like us."

That earned him a sharp look from Harry. "And how would you know what the forest likes?" Constant didn't answer this time, just lit another cigarette without breaking stride. The smoke

curled upward, strangely reluctant to drift, as though the air here was thicker, heavier. Every step forward brought a new little disruption. A branch snagged on Rabbit's coat where none had brushed him before. Roots seemed to rise just enough to trip Jack twice. Harleena's rifle sling caught on an unseen thorn, jerking her back. Harry knew these weren't accidents. He'd heard stories as a kid — about creatures that could walk without leaving a sound, whose feet pointed backward to hide their trail, who'd confuse travelers until they walked in circles or led them to their deaths. He'd laughed at them back then too. Now, in the Deadland Woods, he wasn't laughing. By the time they saw the faint hint of smoke curling above the trees ahead — a sign of a fire, maybe, and the first clearing they'd come across — Harry's nerves were strung tight. The others kept moving with the kind of focus that said they were committed now. But Harry couldn't shake the thought that something was moving just out of sight, keeping pace with them. Waiting. Watching. And maybe… smiling.

The forest seemed even darker now that they had turned back toward the path Constant claimed would lead them to the Ring's resting place. It wasn't just the canopy — though that was dense enough to choke the light into a dim green haze — it was the weight of it all. The cold. The smell of damp soil that clung to their clothes. The creeping sensation that the trees weren't just growing here but standing watch.

Harry's boots squelched in patches of wet moss, caught more than once by roots coiled like knotted muscle. His breath came heavier now, not from exhaustion but from the thoughts gnawing at the back of his mind. Stories he'd laughed off as a kid clawed their way back into focus. The Shadow Men. Shapes that lived in the corners of your eyes. Creatures with their feet pointing the wrong way to lure you deeper into the dark. And now… these unseen stalkers, flickering at the edges of vision.

Harleena's dog padded at her side, its hackles rising every few minutes without cause. Jack kept rubbing his hands together against the cold, muttering under his breath. Rabbit's gaze swept the undergrowth, ever the strategist, searching for an ambush before it happened. And Constant… Constant just walked like he had somewhere to be and the forest itself wouldn't dare stop him.

The ground became uneven, sloping downward through tangled brush. Branches slapped at their faces, snagged their coats. Harry could hear the frustration in Jack's grumbling every time he tripped, the low hiss of Rabbit's curses when thorns caught his gloves. Their progress slowed to a crawl, each step chosen carefully to avoid sinking into hidden mud or twisting an ankle on hidden stone.

Then, without warning, Constant stopped dead. One foot rooted in place, head tilted slightly as if listening to something only he could hear. He raised one hand, palm back toward the group — the universal sign for *stop*.

No one moved.

Harry's irritation spiked almost immediately. "What is it?" he whispered, stepping closer.

"Quiet," Constant murmured. No explanation. Just the same word again, sharper this time: "Quiet."

Harry clenched his jaw. He'd had enough of Constant's riddles and half-answers. Closing his eyes, he reached inward, into the thin, cold stream of magic that pulsed just beneath his skin. The forest sharpened in his awareness — the heartbeat of its life thrumming in roots and leaves, the electric static of wards somewhere distant. But ahead…

Something massive.

The moment Harry's senses brushed it, the thing *felt* him in return. A weight like the gaze of a predator turned directly toward him.

His eyes flew open. "We need to—"

The crash of splintering wood and snapping branches cut him off. Something the size of a horse but broader, heavier, tore through the treeline with terrifying speed. Its shape was human only in outline — thick, corded arms ending in fists like hammers, hooved legs driving it forward. Its head was a monstrous bull's skull, black eyes glinting with hunger and hate. Steam burst from its nostrils with every breath.

"The hell is that?!" Jack shouted, stumbling back.

"Minotaur," Harry growled. "Move!"

The beast didn't slow, lowering its head to charge straight for him. He threw himself sideways, feeling the ground quake under the impact as it plowed past, tearing a furrow into the earth.

Before he could regain his footing, another shape dropped from above — a gaunt, leathery thing with the twisted body of a man but the wings and snarling muzzle of a bat. Its talons raked the air where Jack had been standing a heartbeat before, forcing him into a desperate roll.

"Two of them?!" Rabbit barked, already drawing steel.

The clearing erupted into chaos. Harleena leveled her rifle, but the Minotaur's hide turned the first shot into nothing but a spray of sparks. Harry hurled a blast of raw magic at it, forcing it to stumble a step but not stop. The Nyctarch swooped again, this time grabbing for Jack — and would have carried him into the air if Constant hadn't stepped forward, muttering something sharp and guttural.

Invisible arms, pale and skeletal, erupted from the ground, clutching the Nyctarch's legs and dragging it down mid-flight — *Gravehands*. Jack tumbled free, landing hard but alive.

"First save," Constant called, voice almost bored despite the chaos.

The Minotaur came at him next. Harleena's dog lunged at its flank, buying a split-second's distraction before the beast backhanded it away with enough force to send it yelping into the brush. Rabbit tried to flank it, driving a blade toward its ribs, but the weapon barely bit before the creature swung one massive arm at him.

Constant's hand flicked out again — this time sending a sudden burst of flame in a narrow arc — *Cinder Bloom*, precise and blinding. The blast hit the Minotaur's arm just before it would have crushed Rabbit's skull, forcing the beast back with a bellow of pain.

"Second save," Constant said through gritted teeth, already turning toward the Nyctarch, which had shredded the ghostly arms and was leaping toward Harleena now.

Harry's heart pounded in his ears. They were hitting these things with steel and magic, and they were still coming. The Minotaur's hide was like armor; the Nyctarch moved too fast to pin down. And the forest around them — always watching, always shifting — felt like it wanted to close in and swallow the fight whole. This wasn't going well. Not at all.

The clearing became a storm of motion. Dirt and leaves spun into the air as the Minotaur barreled through the space, its hooves gouging deep trenches into the ground. Harleena fired again, the crack of her rifle splitting the air — the shot hit square in the beast's shoulder, but

instead of dropping it, the impact only staggered it for half a heartbeat. The recoil bit into her arm, and before she could chamber another round, the Minotaur's massive forearm swept across like a swinging log.

She barely had time to twist away, but the blow clipped her elbow. A white-hot line of pain tore through her arm and blood immediately soaked the sleeve of her coat. She stumbled, clutching the wound, gritting her teeth hard enough to grind.

"Harleena!" Rabbit called, darting toward her — but the Minotaur pivoted on her, its shadow blotting her out. Jack lunged, grabbing the beast's attention for just a second, enough for Harleena to stagger clear. The Minotaur's answer was brutal: it grabbed Jack by the chest, hoisting him into the air like a ragdoll, and in the next second was winding up to *throw* him into the nearest tree.

"Not happening!" Rabbit roared, charging in low. He hit the Minotaur's knees with all his weight, forcing the angle of the throw down and away — Jack crashed into the dirt instead of splintering against bark. The wind was knocked out of him, but he was breathing.

There was no time to thank him. A leathery shadow slammed into Rabbit from behind — the Nyctarch, screeching so loud it cut through the ringing in Harry's ears. Its claws ripped across Rabbit's back, tearing fabric and drawing blood. Rabbit spun, stabbing upward with his blade, but the creature was already beating its massive wings, dragging him off his feet.

Jack rolled to his knees, grabbed a loose branch, and threw it with desperate precision. It cracked across the Nyctarch's head, making it drop Rabbit into a crouch. But now its glowing eyes locked on *him*.

"Jack!" Harleena warned — too late. The Nyctarch lunged, hooking its talons into Jack's coat and heaving skyward. Harry's stomach lurched watching him rise — a jerky, unstable climb about three meters into the air. Jack thrashed, one hand fumbling inside his pocket until his fingers closed on cold metal: his spiritbane charm.

Snarling, he slashed it across the Nyctarch's forearm, trying to cut deep enough to make it release him. The creature screeched — but not from pain. The charm flared, sudden and blinding, flooding Jack's vision with white.

And then, beneath the roar of wings, he heard a *voice*.

A man's voice.

"Run. You don't have time. Not from me — from what's coming."

It wasn't the Nyctarch's guttural hiss. It was human, desperate, pleading. Jack's heart slammed against his ribs. "Who—" he started, but the connection shattered as the creature's talons unhooked.

He fell, hard, the impact jarring through his bones. Leaves and dirt exploded around him. Above, the Nyctarch wheeled in a tight arc, shrieking again — but the words still echoed in his mind, clear as the crack of Harleena's next shot.

Harry barely ducked in time as the Minotaur's horns swept over him, close enough that he felt the wind of the pass. Constant shouted something sharp and guttural, and the earth between Harry and the Minotaur erupted into jagged black hands, grasping for the beast's legs. The Minotaur ripped free, but it bought them a second's breathing room — one heartbeat in a fight that was spiraling out of control.

The blood on Harleena's arm was dripping now. Rabbit's back was slick with it too. Jack was gasping, shaken, dirt streaking his face. And somewhere above them, the Nyctarch was circling for another dive.

The forest seemed to lean in closer. Watching. Waiting.

The Minotaur roared, low and guttural, its sheer mass casting a moving wall of shadow as it stomped forward. The Nyctarch swooped again, wind and dust spiraling in its wake. Jack scrambled to his knees, coughing — and Harry moved before thinking, snapping a sharp syllable that cracked like stone splitting.

Jack's skin shimmered, the color of weathered granite sweeping across him in an instant. His breathing hitched at the sudden heaviness, but when the Minotaur's hoof came down in a glancing kick, the impact clanged instead of crunched. Jack rolled clear, grimacing. "Not sure if I can move like this, but I'll take it!"

They were buying seconds, nothing more. The beasts were driving them back step by step, the ground vibrating with every hit from the Minotaur's hooves, every swoop of the Nyctarch's talons. Harleena stumbled again, her injured arm dragging at her speed, and Rabbit threw himself between her and the Minotaur, slashing wildly to keep it at bay. Constant was already moving toward them, coat snapping like a flag, his expression set in grim focus.

Harry's heart was hammering hard enough to blur his vision. The fight wasn't winnable. Not here. Not against these. He didn't even think before shouting, "Run!"

But he realized a half-beat later that no one needed convincing. Jack was already limping backward, Harleena pulling herself upright, Rabbit keeping the Minotaur's attention just long enough to disengage.

Then Constant was beside him, their eyes locking in a moment of unspoken agreement. "Together," Constant said, low.

Harry nodded, and they both raised their hands toward the Nyctarch. Their voices intertwined — Harry's sharp, controlled syllables weaving through Constant's deeper, harsher cadence. The air seemed to ripple between them and the creature, its great wings faltering mid-beat.

For one precious, shuddering second, the Nyctarch's movements slowed. Its head twitched toward them, eyes blazing with something other than bloodlust.

"Grab the Minotaur," Harry gasped. "And leave."

The order slammed into the Nyctarch like an invisible chain. It fought it, muscles straining, claws curling toward the ground as if to dig in. Its wings flared wide, trembling — and then, with a guttural hiss, it turned, lunging for the Minotaur.

The larger beast bellowed in surprise, twisting — but the Nyctarch's talons clamped around its shoulders, and with a violent heave, both creatures crashed away through the undergrowth. Branches snapped. Leaves whipped in all directions.

Harry's knees nearly gave out from the strain of holding the charm, and that's when it came — the voice, low in his skull, clearer than his own thoughts.

"Well done, kid. And… I'm sorry. I'm cursed to be this… man… bat… thing. Get your friends and go."

His stomach tightened. These weren't just monsters. Somewhere in there — under the horns, under the wings — there were people. People trapped. People suffering.

But there was nothing he could do for them now.

"Move!" Harry snapped, already pulling Harleena along. The group scattered into the trees, weaving through the tangled roots and slick moss. Behind them, somewhere far too close, branches crashed as the creatures returned — but they were running blind, and by some streak of luck or misdirection, the monsters' path veered away.

They didn't stop until Harry's lungs burned and his legs were lead. The forest closed back around them, and in the muffled quiet, he could hear only their breathing. Slowly, as if waking from a nightmare, the shapes of his friends emerged from the trees ahead.

Constant was leaning on a low branch, his breath misting in the cool air. Jack was pale under the last traces of stone skin, Rabbit crouched with his blade resting on his knees, and Harleena was tying a strip of cloth tight around her bleeding arm.

They'd survived. But the fight had left its mark — on all of them. And Harry knew the woods weren't done with them yet. They stumbled into a shallow hollow between two ancient oaks, their branches knotted together like skeletal fingers overhead. The canopy blotted out most of the sky, letting in only thin slivers of grey daylight that seemed to struggle to reach the ground. The air here was heavy and damp, clinging to skin and clothes alike, and it smelled of rotting leaves, moss, and the cold tang of wet bark. Every breath carried the lingering copper taste of blood and the burnt tang of magic. Harleena dropped onto a fallen log, teeth clenched as she tightened the makeshift bandage around her arm. Fresh blood still seeped through, darkening the cloth with slow, stubborn persistence. Rabbit crouched beside her immediately, pulling her hand away to check the wound himself, his touch precise and practiced but stiff with frustration. Jack remained standing, one hand pressed hard to his ribs, his breathing ragged but controlled, his eyes locked on Constant. Harry's heart was still hammering in his chest, the sound loud enough in his ears that it drowned out the faint rustle of leaves above. The adrenaline in his veins hadn't faded — it was still buzzing, sharp and electric, making his hands twitch. He stepped forward before he even realized he was moving.

"You should have told us." His voice came out low, but it was the kind of low that only meant it was holding back something louder. "If *that* was the damned test, we had a right to know before you marched us straight into it."

Constant didn't flinch. He leaned on his knees, catching his breath, then looked up with maddening calm — as if Harry's fury was nothing more than background noise, something to let pass and dissipate on its own.
"That?" he said, his tone almost dismissive. "That wasn't the test."

Harry's jaw tightened until it ached. He wanted to shout, to demand answers, to grab Constant by that smug coat collar and shake something useful out of him. And then — Jack. Jack's head tilted, his eyes narrowing, not in suspicion of Harry's anger but at Constant's *answer*. That look wasn't casual. It was the careful, calculating look of a man reevaluating every word, every smile, every pause since they'd met the sorcerer. It was small, but Harry saw it — and it was enough to keep him from crossing the line into blind rage. If Jack was starting to doubt Constant too, maybe Harry didn't have to blow up right here and now. Harleena's voice broke the tension. "Then what were they?" she asked, her tone caught somewhere between disbelief and fatigue.

"Guardians," Constant said, standing upright and rolling his shoulders as if nothing about this conversation was urgent. "That's my guess. Not the test itself. Just the… things that keep the

unworthy from getting anywhere near it. I had to run from them last time too. Didn't get close to the real trial." Harry took a step forward. "Then what *is* the test?"

"Like I just said, boy — I had to run last time." Constant jabbed a finger at him, and there was the faintest edge of irritation in his voice now. "And I was alone, mind you." Harry's gut twisted. Something about the way Constant said it, the *order* of the words, didn't sit right. He couldn't shake the thought: *If he doesn't know what the test is, how can he be so sure that wasn't it?* There was a gap in the story, a seam he could see but not yet pry open. Constant wasn't telling them everything — Harry could feel it. Jack's voice cut through the silence. "Did anyone else hear… voices?"

Rabbit glanced up from Harleena's arm, brows furrowing. "What voices?"

"I heard them," Harry said quickly, his gaze flicking to Jack. "When I was in the Nyctarch's mind. Someone — *something* — spoke to me. Told me to run." Jack nodded once, his expression tightening. "Same here. It wasn't just an animal. There's someone inside that thing." Harleena's eyes narrowed. "Inside them?"

"They're cursed," Harry said. "Not born like that. People — twisted into those shapes."

"How does that help us?" Harleena pressed, her tone sharper now. Harry exhaled hard, shoulders rising and falling in a helpless shrug. "I don't know. I'm not even sure what we're facing next, let alone how that could help us." No one spoke after that. The silence was thick, oppressive, the kind that made every creak of tree branches sound like a threat. The forest felt closer than before, as if the trees themselves were leaning in, listening. Somewhere deep in the distance, something cracked — wood, bone, or something else entirely — and the sound carried on the still air like a warning. Harry's eyes lingered on Constant. The man had already turned his back to them, scanning the treeline, his face unreadable. But to Harry, that unreadability wasn't a mark of confidence anymore. It was a mask. And behind that mask, he was keeping something from them — something big.

For a while, nobody spoke. The only sounds were the soft grind of boots in damp earth, the faint creak of leather straps, and the whisper of leaves brushing together far overhead. Harry could still feel the pounding in his chest from the fight — the echo of adrenaline refusing to settle. He caught the faint scent of iron from Harleena's bandage every time the wind shifted. Constant finally broke the silence. "Well," he said, brushing invisible dust from his coat, "if everyone's still breathing, let's keep moving. We're close now." Harleena was the first to push herself up, her movements deliberate but steady. She didn't so much as glance at Constant, eyes fixed forward as though the very thought of stopping again was intolerable. Rabbit followed closely, his hand resting protectively near her shoulder, his gaze darting over her rather than the path ahead. The two set off without a backward glance.

Harry stayed where he was for a beat longer, his gaze locking with Jack's. There was no spoken word between them, but in that look there was understanding — shared suspicion, maybe even shared frustration. They followed, falling into step behind the others. The forest seemed to close in tighter with every step. Shadows hung low, long and jagged across the uneven ground. The air carried a weight that made every breath feel shallow, every movement harder than it should've been. Not oppressive in the way of fear exactly — but heavy, watchful. The kind of stillness that suggested *something* was watching them back. Harry's thoughts wandered despite himself. He kept returning to the fight, to the way those creatures had moved — the weight of their blows, the strange voices in their minds. He thought, too, of the other presence, the one he had been feeling ever since they entered the woods. The *stalkers*. The flashes of movement in the treeline. The subtle bends in the shadows. The faint laughter that didn't belong to any of them. He could sense them even now, though they remained unseen. Flitting just at the edges

of awareness. Close enough to feel, but not close enough to confront. Always circling. Always watching.

The group trudged on in tense, uneasy silence, until the trees thinned abruptly. They stepped into a clearing so open it was almost jarring after the density of the forest. The ground here was bare — no grass, no moss, just dry, cracked earth. In the center stood a single stump, cut low, no more than knee height. The wood was grey, splintered, and dry with age, as if it had been left to wither for decades. But even here, in this barren patch, one lone vine had wrapped itself lazily around the stump, its green leaves oddly vibrant against the lifeless surroundings. And atop that stump — a wine glass. Simple. Ordinary in shape. Yet impossibly, unnervingly clean. No dust. No smudge. Not a hint of wear. The glass almost shimmered in the filtered light, as if polished seconds before they arrived. Harry froze. The magic here was thick, like a pulse in the air that resonated just beneath his skin. It wasn't the sharp, dangerous taste of raw sorcery — it was older, deeper, more patient. And the stalkers were here. All around. He couldn't see them, but he could feel the weight of their gaze. The sensation crawled along the back of his neck, prickling like the whisper of cold fingertips. They weren't closing in. Not yet. But they had them surrounded. Harry kept his eyes on the wine glass, but his mind was already working over the problem: what in the hells was this? And what would happen the moment someone touched it?

The clearing wasn't just silent — it felt smothered. Like the forest itself was holding its breath. The usual ambient noises of the Deadlands — the distant rustle of leaves, the creak of branches, the occasional crow's caw — were gone, sucked out of the air as though they had no place here. The space was circular, unnaturally so, a bare patch in the middle of the dense woods where the trees seemed to have *chosen* not to grow. In the center stood the stump — low, weathered, the bark long since peeled away, its wood bleached pale as bone. No moss clung to it, no fungus fed on it. No grass dared sprout nearby. It was as though the ground had been burned sterile, only there was no ash, no scorch marks. Just emptiness. And at the very center, balanced perfectly atop the stump, sat the wine glass. Ordinary in shape, delicate, almost fragile-looking. But impossibly clean — not a smudge, not a grain of dust, as though the forest itself was forbidden from touching it.

They fanned out cautiously. Harleena knelt at the edge of the clearing, running her fingers through the soil. She lifted her hand, letting the fine dust fall between her fingers.
"Nothing grows here," she murmured, almost under her breath. "Not even weeds. The ground's… wrong." On the far side, Jack was scanning the earth for tracks. He had that focused squint he got when he was hunting for a con's tell — looking for what wasn't there rather than what was. "No footprints. No broken branches. No signs of *anything* moving through here." He glanced at the stump. "If anyone put that glass there, they didn't walk in like a normal person." Harry stepped toward the center, careful to keep a few meters between himself and the stump. He didn't need to get closer to feel it — the magic here was oppressive, heavy in his chest, prickling over his skin like static before a storm. It wasn't the chaotic wild magic of the woods; this was concentrated, deliberate. Ancient. "There's something here," he said quietly, his voice carrying despite its low pitch. "Strong. Old. It's seeping up from the ground. Every breath feels like I'm swallowing it."

Constant strolled forward, hands in his coat pockets, his eyes narrowing at the glass as if he recognized it. "Then I'd say we've found the test." Harry turned sharply toward him. "That's your guess? *This* is the test?" Constant gave an infuriatingly casual shrug. "We're in the right place. The air tastes like trouble. That's how these things usually start." Rabbit had been pacing near the treeline, his eyes scanning not the canopy above but the darker spaces *beyond* it — the

far-off shadows where the forest's edge folded in on itself. "It's not above us," he said suddenly. "Whatever's watching… it's out there. Past the trees. Lurking just far enough to stay hidden." Harry stiffened. "They've been out there since we crossed into the Deadlands," he said. "Always at the edge. Following. Testing our path." Jack's head snapped toward him. "And you didn't think to bring that up *before* now?"

"I did bring it up," Harry shot back, heat flaring in his voice. "Several times. None of you listened." Jack opened his mouth, but Harleena cut in, keeping her voice level despite the tension. "We don't even know if they're a threat. Just because something's following us doesn't mean it's hostile." Harry turned on Constant. "And you. You've been riding us like a whip since we left Doskvol. Now we're here, and suddenly you're calm? Relaxed? Sitting back like you're waiting for the curtain to go up?" Constant didn't flinch. He just met Harry's gaze with an unreadable expression. "Maybe I just know there's no rushing what comes next." The words landed heavy, and for a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Rabbit crouched near the stump. His hand brushed over its dry, splintered surface, finding shallow grooves worn into the wood. "There's something carved here," he said. "Two words. 'Memento mori.'" Harleena moved closer. "What's that supposed to mean?" Rabbit's brow furrowed, but he didn't answer right away. "Not sure. But… it's not a friendly message." The air between them thickened as the group fell into low, tense conversation — trading theories, picking apart possibilities, their nerves fraying. Jack and Harry kept shooting glances at Constant, as if they were both circling the same suspicion without saying it aloud. Harry's own temper was near breaking. He could feel it in his jaw, the way his molars ground together. Constant was hiding something — that much was clear. And now, for the first time, he saw Jack seeing it too. That alone was enough to keep him from exploding. Barely. While the others argued — voices low but sharp, the way people spoke when they were dangerously close to a fight — Rabbit's eyes drifted back to the glass. The way it caught the faint light without a single blemish, how it sat perfectly centered on the stump, untouched by time or dust… it didn't just *look* unnatural. It *was*.

He didn't announce what he was about to do. Didn't even shift his stance in a way that might draw attention. His arm extended slowly, fingers creeping forward while the others remained locked in their discussion. The glass seemed to gleam brighter the closer he got.

Just a little more…

And his fingertips brushed the cool, perfect rim. The moment Rabbit's fingers closed around the rim of the glass, reality broke.

It wasn't a sound, not at first — it was a *flash*, a ripple in the air like the whole world had glitched. Harry's vision jolted and inverted, and for one terrible heartbeat he thought he'd gone blind. The sky was no longer blue-gray; it was an inside-out negative, pale as bone, with clouds that bled golden light. The sun didn't shine — it cast a deep, oppressive *darkness*, swallowing the edges of the clearing like liquid night. And where shadow should have fallen, bands of searing, unnatural light poured down in thick shafts. The trees, impossibly, remained their same muted greens and browns, but the air between them was *wrong*. No sound. No wind. Not a single leaf stirred. It was as though the forest had died in an instant, the life ripped from it. The silence shattered only when Harleena's dog exploded into frantic barking, lunging in every direction at once, its hackles raised, teeth bared at enemies it couldn't seem to see. Harry's pulse spiked. He caught the quick shift in Constant's face — not fear, not surprise… *resignation*.

“Alright,” Constant began, voice sharp, words tumbling fast like he knew they had seconds before the world moved again, “I owe you an apology. There’s something I know that I haven’t told you… because I was afraid you wouldn’t come.” Harry’s gut tightened. “Now’s the time to—”

“This *is* the test,” Constant cut him off, eyes flicking to each of them in turn. “I came this far once before… and died. Hard to explain.” Jack blinked at him, incredulous. “Died?”

“Later. No time. Keep that thing alive—” Constant jabbed a finger toward a narrow gap between two twisted oaks. “No matter what happens, keep it alive.” Harleena stepped forward, her tone sharp. “Keep *what* alive?” From between the trees, something moved.

It wasn’t walking so much as *sliding* into sight, the way darkness itself might lean into a room. A humanoid shape, its form translucent but unmistakable — Rabbit’s height, Rabbit’s build, Rabbit’s every movement perfectly mirrored in eerie delay. It was as if his shadow had decided to stand up and live its own life. Harry felt his stomach turn. The thing’s edges bled wisps of darkness into the air, as though it was barely holding together. And yet it wasn’t… hostile. It stepped toward them slowly, its pace measured, deliberate.

“What the hell is that?” Harleena whispered. Harry’s voice cracked with disbelief. “Why would we kill that thing?!” Before anyone could answer, Jack’s voice sliced through the air like a blade. “WATCH OUT!”

Harry spun. The treeline was no longer empty.

They were stepping out of the shadows now — small figures, their movements sharp and quick, every step accompanied by the strange *whup* of their rudimentary language. They were *wrong*, every part of them designed to be unsettling: fiery red hair burning with a glow that seemed to light their faces from beneath, eyes glimmering like embers, and feet twisted backward so that every step looked like a retreat even as they advanced.

The Curupira.

They had bows — crude, handmade, yet the arrows they nocked carried an unmistakable shimmer of magic. The tips caught the inverted sunlight, glinting with something far too bright for this broken, dead-silent clearing. Eight of them, closing in fast, their semi-circle tightening until Harry could see the tiny flex in their bowstrings. Their voices overlapped in short bursts — not quite words, more like rhythmic whoops and clicks, an alien conversation that seemed to mock the very idea of language. Harry’s mouth went dry. He heard himself speak without thinking, the words more for his own sanity than for the others. “Curupira are real too.” And now they were here, their circle almost closed, the glass still gleaming atop the stump, and Rabbit’s living shadow drifting closer, as if all of this had been waiting for them.

It started in a blur.

There was no signal, no opening shout — just the tightening of that circle and the sudden flash of movement. One heartbeat the Curupira were advancing, the next the clearing erupted into chaos. Harleena was the first to move. She lunged at the nearest one, her dog snapping at its legs in perfect sync, the two of them a trained storm of teeth and steel. Except… the blade passed *through*. Not over, not around — *through*. Her swing carved only empty air, her knife cutting as if the Curupira was made of smoke. The dog’s snapping jaws met no resistance, only a strange coldness that made it yelp and pull back. “Damn it—!” Harleena stumbled a step, eyes widening. “They’re not solid—!” Too late. Jack was already raising his revolver, snapping off two clean shots into the chest of another Curupira. Each bullet cut through without slowing the thing down, passing harmlessly into the inverted darkness beyond. The Curupira barely flinched — and then, in eerie unison with Harleena’s attacker, it *pointed*.

Both raised their bows in the same instant, strings pulled to full tension. The arrows flew like streaks of burning copper. Harleena's caught her in the shoulder, spinning her halfway around. Jack's buried itself in his thigh, the sudden shock knocking him back a step. Both cried out, their pain swallowed almost instantly by the crushing silence of the clearing. Constant didn't hesitate. His hands flared with heat, and a sphere of fire burst outward from his palms like a miniature sun. The nearest Curupira shrieked — an awful, otherworldly sound that made Harry's teeth ache — as the flames licked across their forms. The fire clung to them for a moment, but they pushed forward anyway, their shapes stuttering in the air like bad film. Harry tried to mirror the move, pulling on the threads of heat around him, forcing the spell into shape. A ribbon of flame coiled from his hands and shot forward — wide, hissing — and missed. The blast lit up the grass, but the Curupira it had been aimed for merely flickered, stepping sideways like water flowing around a rock. It was then Harry saw it.

Not all of them were aiming at the Crows. In fact, most weren't. The ones that *weren't* locked onto Harleena or Jack… were aiming at *it*.

Rabbit's shadow.

The thing hadn't changed its pace. It kept walking, slow and steady, straight toward Rabbit, its movement eerily calm in the middle of the chaos. Harry watched as one of the Curupira loosed an arrow at it — and the arrow passed clean through the shadow's midsection. For a heartbeat, nothing happened. Then Rabbit screamed. Harry's eyes snapped to him just in time to see the stain bloom on his shirt, a perfect spot of red spreading fast, wet and ugly against the fabric. It wasn't from the arrow — not directly. The shadow took the hit, but Rabbit bled. Another arrow. Another cry from Rabbit. The connection slammed into Harry's mind like cold water: every injury the shadow took, Rabbit would suffer. Constant's earlier words hit him now with razor clarity. *Keep that thing alive.* It wasn't some vague moral lesson. It wasn't about mercy. If the shadow fell, Rabbit would go with it. And now every Curupira in the clearing seemed to know it too.

Harry didn't remember deciding to run. His legs just *moved*, pounding against the dirt, the thud of each footfall drumming up through his chest like the beat of a war drum. The clearing blurred at the edges — firelight from Constant's spells flaring in the periphery, shadows twisting unnaturally as the Curupira darted between the trees, their hair blazing like torches in the blackened light of this inverted world. Rabbit was already bleeding, his breaths ragged. The arrows weren't hitting him — not directly — but every shaft that passed through that eerie, translucent figure in his likeness made him jerk as though he'd been struck by lightning. Harry had seen enough magic in his time to know when something was tethered, bound at the soul. This was worse. This was cruel. He threw a hand out toward Rabbit, magic surging in a rush that tasted like iron at the back of his tongue. The spell wrapped him in the familiar shimmer of Stone Skin — granite-grey scales creeping up his arms, shoulders, neck — but the next arrow proved it useless. It pierced the shadow with a sound like cloth tearing, and Rabbit gasped as if a blade had slid into his ribs.

The blood came anyway. Thick, blooming stains spreading across the stone-like surface of his chest. It didn't make sense. The world didn't *care* if it made sense. Harry didn't think; he dove, hurling himself straight at the shadow. His shoulder hit nothing — no resistance, no solidity — and he crashed to his knees in the dirt, palms stinging from the impact. The shadow kept moving, slow and steady, the perfect mirror of Rabbit's body, eyes empty and fixed. The chaos pressed in from every direction. Harleena's dog was snarling, snapping at the flaming-haired stalkers that slipped between the tree trunks like living embers. Constant barked half-incantations between breaths, each word followed by a burst of fire or a crackling shockwave that made the Curupira howl in something between rage and mockery. Jack had his gun up, but every bullet passed through harmlessly, hitting nothing but the air behind. Rabbit was staring at them all. Staring at *him*. His breathing came in shuddering waves, each one

thinner than the last. Harry saw his knuckles whiten around the haft of his weapon, but he didn't lift it. Not against the creatures. Not against the shadow. And then — like a loose stone dislodged from the wall of his mind — something fell into place for Rabbit. His eyes widened, lips parting as if to speak, but for a moment no sound came. Then it did.

"I must die!"

Harry froze, the words lodging in his chest like shrapnel. "Memento Mori, it means I must die!" Rabbit's voice cracked, frantic now. "Harry, Jack, Harleena — please! That's the answer! It's the *only* way!"

"No!" Harleena's scream cut through the din, sharp and raw. She took a step toward him, her face twisted, hair falling loose around her eyes. "No, don't you dare say that! We'll find another way, we always—"

"There *isn't* another way!" Rabbit's voice was ragged, desperate. He staggered as another phantom blow struck his shadow — struck *him* — and blood gushed fresh over his shirt. "If you don't do it now, we *all* die!" Jack's eyes flicked between them, breathing hard, the gun still in his hand but unmoving. Harry felt the world constrict around him. In the space of a breath, Constant's words came roaring back: *"I came this far once before… and died. Hard to explain."* It was the truth. And it was happening again.

The sounds of the clearing blurred together — the shrill, eerie whoops of the Curupira closing in, the hiss of arrows splitting the air, the thump of Constant's Cinder Blooms smashing into the dirt, Harleena's sobbing breaths as she shook her head again and again. Harry's hands felt cold. He didn't realize until now that he'd drawn his pistol. He glanced at Jack. Jack's revolver was already raised, the barrel trembling almost imperceptibly. Jack's eyes met his, and in that silent exchange, Harry knew Jack understood. They both did. "I can't—" Harleena choked, turning her face away as if refusing to acknowledge the moment. Her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, nails biting into her palms. The tears spilling down her cheeks caught the strange inverted light, glinting like drops of mercury. Rabbit's breathing was shallow now, each exhale rasping against the silence between the chaos. "Please," he whispered, softer now, like he was speaking to a friend over a shared drink instead of in the middle of a nightmare. "Before it's too late." The inverted sky above pressed heavy on them all, clouds spilling pale light like a wound bleeding in reverse. The air was thick, charged with the hum of magic and something older, darker, watching.

Harry took aim.

The sound of his heartbeat filled his ears, drowning out everything else.

Rabbit stood with his back to Harry, facing Jack. The strange inverted light painted everything in impossible colors — shadows pale, blood black, the air a thin, metallic taste in the back of the throat. Harry's hand was steady, but his stomach felt like it had been hollowed out. His pulse pounded in his ears, each thud an echo of the choice he was about to make. Jack moved first. The crack of his revolver shattered the stagnant air, a burst of sound so sharp that it seemed to tear a seam in the silence. The bullet hit Rabbit square in the chest — Harry saw the impact ripple through him, his body jolting like a marionette pulled too hard on its strings. Harry fired a fraction of a second later, muscle memory taking over before thought could intervene. His shot hit Rabbit in the back. A dark bloom spread instantly through the fabric, staining it like ink seeping into paper.

Harleena had turned away a heartbeat before, but the sound of the gunfire ripped through her all the same. Her scream tore from her throat raw and animal, a sound of disbelief and anguish that made Harry's own chest tighten until he could barely breathe. Her dog moved before

anyone else could — before thought, before mercy — lunging at Rabbit with sudden, feral purpose. Its teeth clamped around his neck with a deep, wet crunch, dragging him down. Harry's eyes locked on the scene, unable to look away as the animal shook violently, the motion sending arcs of crimson across the dirt. It wasn't an attack in defense anymore — it was the killing blow. Constant's voice shouted from somewhere off to the side, his hands flaring with bursts of fire, but even the magic seemed dim against the weight of what was happening in the center of the clearing. The Curupira kept closing in, their glowing hair weaving through the treeline like a tightening net, bows drawn, their strange, otherworldly whoops sounding almost gleeful now.

And still — for Harry — it felt like the world had slowed to a crawl.

Rabbit's eyes, wide and glassy, found Jack for an instant. His lips moved, though no sound came. Then his gaze shifted, as if searching for Harry, but the motion faltered. His knees buckled. Harry shut his eyes. He couldn't watch the final collapse. He couldn't watch the life drain from someone he'd bled beside, laughed with, trusted in the fire. In the darkness behind his lids, sound became the only thing left.

Harleena's scream.
The wet snap of the dog's jaws.
The faint hiss of Constant's fire cutting through the air.
The dull, ragged thud of Rabbit's body hitting the ground.

Then —

A shift.

A breeze touched Harry's skin, cool and startling after the stifling air of the inverted sky. The warmth of the sun returned, spilling over him, carrying the scent of leaves and soil as if the forest itself had exhaled. The inverted light was gone. But his ears still rang. Not with magic, not with gunfire — but with Harleena's scream, replaying, twisting, a wound in sound that Harry knew he'd never be able to forget.

Harry's eyes cracked open like a door on rusted hinges, every blink dragging the sting of tears across them. The world swam in watery shapes and muted colors at first, like looking through glass. Then… The colors were normal again. That wrong, inverted sky was gone, replaced by the familiar muted grays and browns of the Deadland Woods. But the shift hit him harder than he'd expected — the normalcy itself felt alien, like waking from a nightmare to find the bed in the wrong place. His breath came sharp, uneven. He was standing. Standing where he'd been *before* he'd run for Rabbit.

Before the shooting.
Before the screaming.
Before the dog's jaws locked down.

It took a second to understand what that meant. Harleena was there too, rooted to the spot she'd been in before the chaos, her face streaked with tears, eyes wide and hollow. Jack was a few steps away, one hand braced against his knee as though he might still be in mid-movement when everything… shifted. He looked around like a man dropped into the wrong room entirely. Even Constant was back in position, a stillness about him now that made Harry's skin crawl. The dog was there too, tail lowered, head twitching as it scanned the treeline.

And the Curupira…

Gone. No whisper in the branches, no fiery hair between the trunks. Harry probed the edges of his magical senses and felt nothing — no stalkers, no invisible eyes boring into his skin. It was like they had never been. He didn't want to look. Gods, he didn't want to look. But he did. Where he expected to see Rabbit's body — torn, still, drenched in blood — there was… Rabbit. Standing. Alive. His chest rose and fell in rapid, uneven bursts, each breath like it hurt to take. His eyes weren't on anyone. They were somewhere else entirely, staring at a point far beyond the clearing. Harry didn't think. His legs moved before the rest of him caught up, and Harleena was already there, colliding with Rabbit in a fierce embrace. Her arms clutched him so tightly it was as if she was daring the world to take him again. She buried her face against his shoulder, sobbing without restraint, her fingers trembling in the fabric of his clothes. No one said anything at first. No one could. Rabbit's hands stayed loose at his sides for a long, strange moment, before they lifted, weakly, to return the hug. When he finally spoke, his voice came low and raw — a voice scraped against stone. "Did we… did we pass?" Silence.

Harry felt Jack move rather than heard him — the soft *thump* of him collapsing to the forest floor, his legs buckling under the weight of exhaustion and adrenaline. His hands hung limply between his knees, head tilted forward as his breath came in sharp, almost wheezing pulls. No one answered Rabbit's question. Not Constant. Not Harry. The truth was, none of them knew what the hell had just happened. They stood in the clearing, lungs burning, hearts pounding, each of them straining to make sense of the impossible. The air still felt charged, heavy, as though the forest itself was holding its breath. Harry's gaze shifted back to the stump. The wine glass — the thing that had started all of this — was gone. In its place sat something far older, far heavier, and infinitely more dangerous. The Umbral Ring.

It gleamed despite the muted light, its strange metal catching in a way no gold or brass ever had. Five wickedly thin daggers hung from short gold chains, swaying almost imperceptibly in a breeze Harry couldn't feel. The center bore a pyramidal emblem, etched with an eye that — Harry swore — shifted ever so slightly when he wasn't looking directly at it. The air around it hummed with a low, steady thrum that prickled against his skin, a sound too deep to hear yet impossible not to feel. There was a faint scent with it too — incense burned down to ash, and something colder, older, like dirt from a grave that had been undisturbed for centuries. Even the ghosts avoided it. He could feel that, like a ripple in the space between worlds. It sat there on the dead wood, waiting. Waiting for someone to claim it.

They sat in a tight circle, their bodies drawn close as if proximity alone could shield them from what had just happened. The silence between them was not awkward — it was heavy, suffocating, a silence so dense it seemed to press in from all sides. No one looked at each other for a long time. It could have been minutes or hours; time had lost all meaning in the clearing. Breath came slow, deliberate. The only sounds were the faint rustle of leaves above and the distant creak of the forest shifting, as though the Deadlands itself was leaning in to listen. It had not been a dream. None of them believed that. No illusion could make the muscles ache like this, could leave such a gnawing pit in the stomach. The memory of screaming, of blood, of the sunless sky — it was too vivid, too cruel. Harry's mind circled the same thought over and over, each rotation cutting deeper: *The first time I pulled the trigger… it was on the back of a friend. With the intent to kill.* He'd told himself he was doing what had to be done, but the image wouldn't leave — the recoil in his hands, the sharp bark of the pistol, Rabbit jerking forward.

What must it have been like for Rabbit? To live through his own death? Harry couldn't even begin to imagine it. Harleena hadn't spoken a word since the reset, her dog pressed close to her side. She'd stopped wiping her face at some point, letting the tears dry in salt tracks along her cheeks. Jack sat slouched, his elbows on his knees, staring at the dirt between his boots like it might hold some kind of answer. They stayed like that, just breathing, until the pounding in their veins slowed, until their hearts began to remember their normal rhythm. It was Constant who finally broke the spell. A small, almost embarrassed cough — the kind you make when you

know you're intruding but can't stand the quiet anymore. His voice came softer than usual, stripped of its usual confidence. "…How's our friend doing?" Rabbit didn't answer.

He didn't even look at Constant. His gaze was locked on the stump, on the object sitting there as though it had been waiting for him for centuries. The Umbral Ring caught what little light filtered through the canopy, its strange metal glinting in muted gold. Without a word, Rabbit pushed himself to his feet. The sudden movement drew everyone's eyes. Harleena was on her feet in an instant, voice sharp with panic. "What the hell are you doing?" Rabbit didn't answer her either. He walked, each step deliberate, boots crunching against the dry, lifeless earth of the clearing. Harleena hovered a step behind, ready to grab his arm, but something in his posture — the way he carried himself now — made her stop short. He reached the stump. His hand hovered above the ring for a fraction of a second — just long enough for everyone to hold their breath. The forest seemed to still again, as though the air itself was waiting. Then his fingers closed around it. The metal was unnervingly warm, almost pulsing in his grip, but nothing happened. No blinding light. No scream from the trees. No collapse of the world around them. Just… silence. Rabbit turned the ring over in his hands once, twice, then slipped the chain over his head. "I've earned this damn thing now," he said, voice low but steady. Constant gave the smallest of nods, an unspoken agreement passing between them that made Harry's chest tighten. The ring hung heavy against Rabbit's chest as he stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and Constant. He stopped just shy of him, eyes steady. "How do I use it?" Constant looked at him for a long moment. Something flickered across his face — pride, maybe, or something older and more complicated. His lips curved into a small smile, and Harry noticed his eyes were glistening.

The group remained in the clearing, an island of stillness in the endless reach of the Deadland Woods. No voices carried — only the shapes of their movements, framed in the dim light. Constant stood close to Rabbit, his hands sketching slow, deliberate patterns in the air, fingers curling and unfolding like he was weaving invisible threads between them. Rabbit's head was lowered in focus, eyes fixed on the Umbral Ring, the faint tremor in his fingers betraying the weight of it — not just its mass, but what it meant. A thin halo of pale light began to pool at the base of his throat, where the golden artifact hung, swelling and shrinking with each measured breath. Harleena crouched nearby, one knee in the dirt, her dog pressed against her side. Her face was still flushed from crying, but now she simply watched — unmoving, arms wrapped around the animal as if it were her anchor in a world that had nearly tipped her into the abyss. Jack lingered at the edge of the stump's shadow, knees drawn up, forearms resting across them. His eyes never left Rabbit, sharp and searching, as though trying to read something hidden in his friend's movements. Every now and then, his fingers twitched toward his sidearm, then stilled again. Harry stood slightly apart, arms crossed, gaze fixed somewhere beyond the group. His eyes were glassy, the set of his jaw tight — the picture of someone wrestling with thoughts they couldn't afford to voice. The flicker of the Umbral Ring's glow caught in his eyes, reflecting like firelight in a pair of deep wells.

The light grew, spilling outward in slow waves until it bathed Constant in its strange warmth. His smile broadened, his head dipping in what might have been relief… or release. Behind him, unnoticed, Rabbit's shadow bent unnaturally — splitting for the briefest moment into two jagged silhouettes, like a rift in reality. Then, just as quickly, it slid back into one.

None of them saw.

The glow receded, swallowed again by the dim hues of the forest. They stood as they were for a long time — no one moving, no one speaking — the air between them heavy with the knowledge that nothing would ever be quite the same. The clearing began to fade into distance, the edges of the scene softening as if the world itself was drawing away. Figures grew smaller,

details blurred — the pale curve of the stump, the faint gleam of gold at Rabbit's chest, the slow rise and fall of tired shoulders. And then, only the forest remained.

Story: The Unforgiven Path of Constant

I was only ten when I first tasted the true bitterness of loss. My mother died suddenly, leaving behind a void that swallowed our family's joy. My father, a reclusive scholar of the dark arts, buried himself deeper in his forbidden books. In my desperation, I sought solace in those same books, hoping to find a way to bring her back. The texts were ancient, their pages filled with cryptic symbols and ominous warnings. Undeterred, I deciphered them with the fervour of a child clinging to hope. After months of study, I found a ritual—a dark incantation that promised to resurrect the dead. I was too young to understand the price it demanded.

On a stormy night, I gathered the required items and began the ritual. My six-year-old sister, Mary, watched with wide, trusting eyes. The candles flickered, and the air grew cold. I chanted the forbidden words, feeling a surge of power unlike anything I'd known. But instead of my mother, a demon emerged from the shadows, its presence suffocating. The demon, a twisted embodiment of malevolence, could not be controlled by my feeble skills. It roared with laughter, its eyes burning with infernal fire, and in one horrifying moment, it seized Mary's soul. She screamed as she was dragged into the abyss, her innocent eyes pleading for help I could not give. The demon's final gift to me was a curse: my soul would never enter heaven, forever stained by my failure. The aftermath was a blur of anguish and guilt. I dedicated my life to mastering the dark arts, determined to undo my mistake. I rose through the ranks of exorcists, earning the title of Constant, one of the most powerful practitioners of our craft. Yet, despite all my power, I never found a way to free Mary from her torment.

Years passed, and whispers of a powerful artefact reached my ears—the Umbral Ring, said to be capable of breaking even the strongest curses. My search led me to Doskvol, summoned by my old friend Lannic. Though his mission was urgent, my personal quest took precedence in my mind. In Doskvol, I encountered a group called the Crows. They were a motley crew, but I saw potential in them. They agreed to help me, driven by their own motives and a shared desire for redemption. Together, we sought the Umbral Ring, facing dangers that tested our resolve.

Today, my path led me to an old acquaintance—Mistress Vehl. She fancied herself a fortune teller, but I knew her true nature. She possessed an item I needed, the Isekai Eye, which allowed glimpses into other worlds. I arrived at her shabby establishment, the scent of incense mingling with the musty air. The sign above the door creaked in the wind, and the dim light inside cast eerie shadows.

Pushing open the door, I stepped into the dimly lit room. She glances up, ready to greet a new customer.

"Welcome, newcomer. Come and let's see what your future... oh damn. It's you, Conrad. What are you doing here?"

Conrad smirks, stepping further into the room. "*Yes, it's me. I missed you too, darling. Still robbing those poor souls who come to see you?*"

Mistress Vehl narrows her eyes but can't suppress a grin. "*It's an honest way to make money, and no, I never robbed anyone. Out with it, Conrad. What do you want?*"

"*I need a peek at the Isekai Eye, honey. I need to check something.*"

She mutters under her breath, "*Bastard, I should never...*" Then she stands up and leads him to the back. Opening a safe, she retrieves a bowl filled with a brilliant liquid, its borders adorned with intricate inscriptions. The liquid shimmers with power.

"*Make it quick, and leave,*" she says, handing him the artefact. Conrad gives her a cheeky smile. "*The only way I know how to operate.*"

He sits down with the bowl on his lap, concentrating and gazing into its blinding light. After a few moments, he stands and hands it back to Vehl. "*So? Did you see what you were looking for?*" she asks, curiosity tinged with frustration. Conrad takes a deep drag of his cigarette and smiles broadly. "*I didn't see a damn thing. And it makes me so happy to finally say that.*" Intrigued, Mistress Vehl frowns. "*Seeing nothing is a good thing now? What were you looking for?*"

Matt's smile widens. "*That's none of your business, my dear.*" Singing a happy tune, he turns and leaves her in puzzled silence.

Chapter 7: The Draft Under the Door

Rabbit woke with his hands already clenched, breath clawing at his throat, the taste of smoke and metal thick on his tongue. For a heartbeat he didn't know whether the sky was the wrong way round again. The ceiling above the old sofa held still—peeling paint, smoke-stained plaster, a hairline crack that ran like a riverbed toward the far wall. No white sun bleeding darkness. No shrieking arcs of copper light. Just the house and its wounded quiet. Sweat cooled fast on his skin. The sofa's horsehair stuffing had a way of finding every rib; it pressed a ghostly mold of his body into the sagging cushions. A drifting column of dust turned in the thin light from the window, slow as a thought. Somewhere deeper in the house a hammer struck wood with a patient, measured tempo. It shouldn't have sounded anything like gunfire, but his body didn't ask permission. Each blow landed in him as if the Deadlands had followed them home. He lay still and let the room come back by increments. The scorched smell embedded in the walls. The clean slice of sawdust that wasn't there a week ago. The faint chemical bite of Lazarus's antiseptics, leaking up from the basement with the cold. The cheap wall clock they'd rescued from an Imperial Police eviction ticked with stubborn regularity—one small thing that hadn't broken under heat or boots.

The weight at his sternum pulsed warm and steady. The chain had worn a new curve into his collarbone in only a few days, a little track where skin remembered it. When he lifted a hand, the Umbral Ring answered before his fingers reached it—a hum felt rather than heard, a prickle that ran the length of his forearm like a warning wire. He didn't touch it. Not yet. Sometimes, when he did, a thick sweetness rose at the back of his nose—incense and grave-dirt—and the world lost an inch of color. He sat up carefully, pretending the old springs hadn't nearly folded him in half. The blanket slid into his lap, damp with sweat. Someone—probably Harry—had draped it there during one of his unplanned noon collapses. Sleep had come in ambushes since the Deadlands. It didn't matter how he staged his body, what he drank, how long he stared at the rafters first. Sooner or later he crossed a seam he couldn't see and the forest reached back. The body remembered the moment between the shots, the single breath in which choosing had weight. In the dream, it was always longer. He stood there forever, telling them to do it. A thousand times the same sentence, a thousand times the same nod, a thousand times the same drowning light. The hammer ticked again. He followed the sound with his gaze until it became human—work, not war. The house had been louder every day since they returned, busy with other people's hands. Jack's measured bark. Mick Rich's precise, uncomplaining cadence. Hired muscle that knew a joist from a battering ram. The place would never be new again. But boards were going up where there had been air. Someone had bullied a new pane into the kitchen window; it held the rain at a different angle. The drifts of ash they hadn't gotten to yet were smaller each morning. He pushed to his feet. The blankets slid and the Ring swung, tapping bone. His shirt clung to his back. He tried to breathe past the tightness and felt the floorboards announce him in their old voice—two groans near the hearth, a small pop by the threshold where the nails had learned the trick of movement.

Noise from the hallway braided itself with the steady kitchen clatter—soft ceramic, the scrape of a bowl on wood, a murmur that was not words so much as a mood. He didn't have to guess twice. Harleena kept her voice like she kept her knives: sheathed unless needed. The dog made more sound than she did, and even that was mostly breath and the delicate click of teeth on metal. The kitchen had reclaimed its shape from the fire in fits. The new window gave the room a square of watery light, pale as the inside of a seashell. Someone had scrubbed the black from the ceiling but smoke swam in it still, a memory that didn't mind being chased. A clean cloth had been pinned as a curtain over the gate into the yard. The table—three-legged now, a fourth invented from mismatched timber and faith—was dusted with fine sawmote and a scatter of nails that had rolled like coins to the edge. The tin sink looked new only because the old one

had been carried away. Harleena stood with her back to the window, sleeves rolled, hair caught at the nape with a leather tie. The bandage under her right elbow had been changed in the past hour; a pale, fresh seam of linen showed through an open shirt cuff. She held a tin scoop in her left hand and laid out supper in the slow, even rhythm of someone who had nowhere else she'd rather be than exactly here, ensuring the dog ate like a soldier. The Cane Corso sat in a square of shadow, head up, eyes intent on her hand. Not a whine. Not a shuffle. When she told him to wait, he did, body only, everything else already moving.

She glanced up as Rabbit crossed the threshold, and the barest flick of attention registered him—his shirt stuck to his spine, the tremble hiding in his fingers, the blankness sleep left when it went wrong. "Water?" Her voice didn't push. It simply made a place in the air for an answer. He nodded. She pulled a glass from the shelf. The rim had a tiny chip that caught the light like a tooth. The pump leapt twice before it gave water and the water came cold, the first swallow making the throat try to refuse it. He held the glass with both hands until the shaking slowed, the Ring knocking a quiet rhythm against the cup each time he brought it to his lips. Once, as the surface settled, the liquid threw a warped reflection back at him—an eye in a triangle, not quite where it should be. He blinked and it was only water again.

Harleena scooped the last of the meat, set the tin down, and stepped back. The dog waited until she touched the bowl and then bent his head, working with a solemn efficiency that matched hers. His ears were cropped but his attention wasn't. He ate and watched Rabbit without moving his eyes. When Rabbit lifted the glass again, the dog's nostrils flared once, cataloguing metal, sweat, old smoke, and the particular brass-sweet scent the Ring wore like a coat. "How long?" she asked, wiping her hands on a cloth, not looking at the clock because she already knew the answer was measured in seeing, not minutes. "Middle of the day," he said, and heard the dryness in his own voice. "Maybe an hour."

"An hour," she repeated, as if trying the weight of it. "You were noisy at the end."

"Sorry."

"You don't owe me sorry for breathing."

Her eyes went from him to the window and back. There was a strain in the way she held her mouth that wasn't pain, not exactly; pain lived in the arm, tidy and contained. This was the other thing. She'd watched him die. You didn't mend that with bandage or sugar tea or any of the little household rituals that made a place decent again. Some human seams refused a needle. Rabbit swallowed, the water catching on the way down, and let the rim rest against his lower lip. The noise of the house took a step closer—the thud and drag of lumber, a man's curse coughed rather than thrown, Mick's cool murmur, a nail bit too shallow and set again. It should have steadied him. The world was business. But the hammer chose that moment to strike in a run of three, close together, and his body flinched before his mind could stop it. The dog's head snapped up, gaze cutting to him, then the door. Harleena's chin turned, just enough to mark the angle of his shoulders. "Sit," she said, softer. It wasn't a command. It was a place to land.

He bumped the chair back with his calf and obeyed. The wood was cool through his trousers. His spine found the straight of the backrest and he locked into it, one vertebra at a time. The Ring warmed, then settled. He kept his hands around the glass as if it were a heat-source the house had forgotten to pay for. "You could take the upstairs bedroom for a while," she said. "Less traffic. The noise is different up there. More… softer. I don't know the word."

"It's fine here."

She didn't argue. She tipped the scoop into the feed sack, tied it off, and set her shoulder against the cabinet door until the swollen wood consented to close. The muscles in her jaw

moved with that small effort; the bandage tugged. The dog finished his food and sat exactly as he had before, head back up, a model carved from dusk. “I had the dream again,” Rabbit said, and found he could shape the words without breaking. “Only this time it took longer to die. I kept asking you to do it and you wouldn’t. You kept putting the gun down and picking it up. Jack’s mouth moved and no sound came out of it. The sky—” He stopped. There was no language for that wrong sun that didn’t make a lie of it.

Harleena braced her palms against the edge of the sink and looked at the empty yard curtain as if the linen could supply a second opinion. “Harry told me,” she said. “About the voices. The thing in the bat. That he spoke to it.” Rabbit made a sound that could have been agreement. Or a man remembering how thin mercy was. “He also told me you told him to shoot you.” Her tone didn’t ask for a correction. It set the fact down between them with quiet hands. He nodded. “It was the only way past.”

“I know,” she said, and then said nothing else for the space of a dozen heartbeats. He watched the silence work on her. It touched the corners of her mouth and the line between her brows, but the rest of her face stayed still. “You’re going to tell me it doesn’t matter that it was necessary. You’re going to tell me it still happened.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you anything,” Rabbit said. The water was gone. He set the glass down on the table and the Ring chimed against it, a neat, domestic note that didn’t belong to any of this. “You don’t need my help to know what’s true.”

“Maybe not,” she said. “But you’re not the only one who hears the hammer wrong.”

The dog’s head turned at the word hammer. He had learned their language faster than some men learned a card game. Harleena reached to smooth the fur between his eyes and felt the steady engine under his skull, big dog, big heart, singular purpose. Rabbit let his gaze travel the kitchen like he was learning it anew. The solder seam in the pump spout where Mick had made old metal want to live again. The ghost of char still baked into the grout lines. A damp ring on the table left by somebody’s careless cup. The corner where the garden door stuck, and the clever little wedge somebody had whittled so they didn’t have to kick it every time. These were the small proofs that time hadn’t stopped. Rooms got better, a breath at a time.

“Any word?” he asked without moving anything but his mouth. “From the Unseen.”

Harleena shook her head once. “Not yet.”

“Constant?” Rabbit asked.

“Gone. Says he got some of his own stuff to deal with. Wished us luck.” A beat. “He asked after you before he left.”

Rabbit’s mouth crooked, not a smile. “He’d ask after a locked door if it had a story behind it.”

“He’d pick the lock first,” she said, and that time the corner of her own mouth changed shape, almost against her will. It was gone quickly. “Harry’s with Mick in the front room. Jack’s talking our hired men into thinking with the right end of the hammer.” The hammer ticked, obligingly, as if it had been waiting on its cue.

The Ring warmed again. Not heat. More like the temperature of living skin. Rabbit felt it travel the curve of the chain and settle under his breastbone. The eye on the central pyramid never moved when he was looking, but sometimes the light in the room arranged itself to make him believe it had. He breathed carefully around it and angled his body so the dog wouldn’t be looking straight at him when the thing did whatever it did next. Harleena poured more water. He

hadn’t asked for it. She set it near his hand and leaned her hip against the table, eyes on the yard curtain, posture a study in casual guard. “I fed you terrible liquor in a terrible tavern and told you this city was going to eat you,” she said, after a long quiet. “Turns out the woods got there first.”

“They’ll send us a bill,” he said, because sometimes a man had to joke or he’d start praying and never stop.

She made a low sound that might have been agreement. “Sleep upstairs tonight,” Harleena said, as if the room hadn’t just moved under them. “I’ll sit first watch. Dog will take second. House can have third.” Harleena reached across and, without asking, set her fingers lightly against the Ring through Rabbit’s shirt. Her face didn’t change but the dog’s ears tipped forward, just enough to register the contact. “Still warm?” she asked.

He nodded, and because he could, he took another slow drink and let the glass ring once against the wood. The sound wasn’t the forest’s sound. It belonged to a room with a table and bad curtains and a dog who had learned the word wait in a single try. It belonged to a house, half-broken and being mended, that might yet choose their side. He listened to it fade, and this time, when the hammer struck, his breath didn’t jump to meet it. The day held. The ring hummed. The living did what they always did in Doskvol when the world gave them one thin inch of peace—they took it, quietly, and nailed it down.

The kitchen door swung in on a draft that smelled of wet timber and street coal. Jack came through it like a man being chased by the ghosts of his own patience, one palm full of bent nails and a length of string, the other sorting through a pocket that never seemed to have what he’d put in it. “Has anyone in this house ever returned a chisel to the same plane of existence twice?” he announced to the room at large. “I swear on the Emperor’s last good sock—if I label a box ‘chisels,’ that is not an invitation for it to adopt hammers, screws, or a family of spoons.” He stopped hard when he saw Rabbit at the table. The complaints dissolved mid-roll of his eyes, leaving him awkwardly holding the string like he’d forgotten what hands were for. Some of Jack’s expressions were built for audiences; this one wasn’t. It made him look younger. “You… ah.” He cleared his throat, gaze skittering from the damp at Rabbit’s collar to the glass on the table, to the Ring’s dull gleam beneath the shirt. “You alright?”

Rabbit tipped the glass, enough to show there was water in it and not much else. The dog watched Jack with that silent, judicial interest only dogs and magistrates possess. Harleena’s attention didn’t move off Rabbit, but he could feel it steadying the room from where she leaned at the sink. “Getting there,” Rabbit said. Jack nodded as if that were an answer he’d been holding out for, then looked for somewhere to put the string and chose his pocket again, as though the pocket might have forgiven him by now. He came farther in, shook sawdust from his cuffs, and found his more comfortable register—a talking rhythm that kept the air busy. “We need coin,” he said, light, like a man remarking on the weather’s old habit of being wet. “I’ve hidden the basement entrance the way I said I would—panel’s flush on the wall, slides like it was born there, even squeaks like an old plank if you put your ear to it. You could walk an Imperial Police officer through that hall and he’d swear there’d always been a pantry door and never a passage. But some materials don’t just oblige because I wink at them, yeah? I can do miracles with rubbish, but I can’t conjure concealed hinges, a proper locking plate, or enough decent plaster to keep the seam from showing when the sun gets nosy. And the lads out front—if we want speed and silence instead of speed and swearing, they’re going to want paying.” Rabbit set the glass down and let the rim make that small, ordinary ring against the wood. “Anyone heard of any work worth the risk?”

Harleena’s eyes cut to him, quick and clean. Worry didn’t change her voice; it sharpened it. “You should be recovering, not shopping for trouble.” Jack lifted both hands, palms out, as if he were

at a card table and the dealer had accused him of hiding kings in his sleeves. “I don’t know of any jobs. Not the kind you mean. But I’ve got an idea cooking.” From the doorway, Harry’s voice arrived before he did. “It’s a crazy one,” he said, stepping into the kitchen with a smudge of lime on his cheek and the particular brightness he got when the future might explode in a new direction. “The best kind,” Jack returned, pleased by the cue. He perched on the edge of the three-legged table as if it were a stage and pretended not to notice Harleena’s jaw set a fraction harder. “Reckless is not a flavor,” she said. “It’s a way people bleed.” Jack gave her a little bow of concession and turned back to the room. “You hear things when you walk the lines between stations and taverns. Porters talk. Night watchmen are bored and think out loud. Every now and then, crates are coming in by train—nice, anonymous crates with labels that lie politely, and men who care more about the ledger than the cargo. Nothing heroic. No Royal seals to poke gods with. But heavy. Quiet. Regular.” He let the word regular hang where even a starving man could see its meat. “Acquire,” he went on, making the syllables smooth, “one of those crates. The right one. Once.”

“Train heist!” Harry blurted, the two words lighting him like a match. Harleena didn’t sigh. She simply shifted her weight like a soldier who’s about to list the terrain. “Moving targets on steel rails. Limited egress. Predictable routes. Imperial Police at every station, and if the Espiritas Police aren’t watching the tracks this week, it’ll be the Imperial Police making a show of it. The Ember Circle will have ears in freight—Emberlash’s men like to know what burns, and where. Gloam Sisters don’t need ears; they need a single shadow. We don’t have the horses for a chase or the boats for a bridge. We don’t have the kind of luck that repeats on command.” Her gaze cut to Rabbit, then back to Jack. “And you’re asking for a plan in days, not weeks.”

“Also,” Rabbit said, the word entering the room like a colder draft, “Merrow. And whatever Ladher becomes if someone else chooses to wind it.” The name took the temperature down another notch. Even the dog paused in his small, efficient breaths, as if sound, too, could listen. The house handled the silence for them: a hammer, a muttered oath, a nail tapping its arguments into old wood. Jack held the quiet, then set it down carefully. “All true,” he said. “We’re not robbing the Emperor’s dining car. A crate, not a legend. But we need a base worth the trouble we’re already making. If we mean to go after the Royal Family—and we do, because they don’t stop breathing just because we’re tired—we need walls that don’t fall when somebody sneezes, doors that don’t swing open for a whisper, and a cellar that hides what we keep in it. Money gets us there faster than admirable self-denial does.” He spread both hands, inviting the room to count fingers. “We don’t put our names on it. We don’t die on it. We take something nobody kisses goodnight, and then we stop. One train, one crate, one quiet nighttime in which the city blames the wrong men and we buy hinges that don’t squeal.” Harry was already nodding, as if his body had signed the agreement while his mind was still reading it. “I can jam signals,” he said, too fast. “Lights on the track, whistles—make the driver think he’s got a fault and slow the train where we want it.”

“And I can make a guard’s memory softer than bread, for the thirty seconds you need,” Jack added, as if the detail might come free with the pitch. Harleena didn’t move from the sink. Worry in her looked like math. “One crate becomes two when greed stands up. One train becomes three when luck holds once. Heat makes men stupid. We’ve buried enough proof of that.” Rabbit watched them talk, the tide of the room running around his chair and through him both. The Ring warmed. The cut-glass shadow of the windowpane lay across the table like the beginnings of a map. The hammer down the hall struck again, steady as a clock, a man persuading wood to agree with him. He set his hand flat to the table, the other still around the glass, and didn’t say yes or no. He measured the space between what they wanted and what the world was likely to give. He set Merrow’s name beside the word train and felt how both were engines in different guises. Jack slid off the table, decision already pulling his posture straighter. “I’ll go back out after we eat,” he said. “Listen more. Find the rhythm of the manifests, the guard rotations, which foreman drinks where. No promises I can’t keep. Just better questions.”

“Find us a way to do it without running on top of the car,” Harleena said. “I’ve no wish to shoot from a roof at thirty miles an hour unless somebody pays me a poet’s wage.” Jack’s mouth crooked. “We’ll steal the poet’s purse while we’re there.” Harry laughed, quick and too loud, then looked to Rabbit like a boy checking a father’s face for permission he didn’t need. Rabbit lifted the glass and drank, not to answer but to think. The water was clean and the aftertaste was metal; the Ring knocked once against the cup like a small bell calling a room to order. He set it down. “Look,” he said to Jack, to Harry, to the line of Harleena’s back. “I’ll hear it. All of it. We choose when we have more than hope.”

Rabbit rose without a word, thumbed the chain once, and tucked the Umbral Ring deep under his shirt. Out of sight, out of mind for anyone who might be looking. Harleena asked where he was going. “Walk,” he said. “Let my mind breathe.” He grabbed the black-paper notebook from the hall peg and stepped into the street.

Rain had rinsed the alleys clean of grit but none of the city’s old smells—coal and canal, tar and fish. He walked with the steady caution of someone who had learned the value of second looks. The notebook was fat with folded broadsheets and pencil-scarred margins. A Chronicle sketch of Merrow Valesque—sharp grin wired to sharper eyes—rode on the first page, above a headline that always put iron on Rabbit’s tongue: THE TERROR OF DOSKVOL. They hadn’t known who they were cutting free under the Governor’s House. Necessity and regret took turns speaking in his head; neither raised their voice.

He flicked through routes and names he’d collected over months: the Royal Gang’s drop points, Emberlash’s men near the Night Market spur, a foreman in Hexspire who took coin to forget what he saw. One entry had been underlined until the paper thinned. Crimson Chemical.

The plant sat between Hexspire and the Night Market like a grounded ironclad, all hard edges and stubborn height. Brick skin blackened by decades of smoke. Sawtooth roofline biting at a low sky. A rack of pipes stitched building to building, half of them ending in nothing, as if the city had changed its mind halfway through a thought. The air was wrong—acrid, medicinal, with a sweet note that didn’t belong. Somewhere inside, metal tapped metal with the patience of a machine that refused to admit it was off.

The perimeter fence had two practical wounds: a low tear for men with bad knees, a high one for men who liked to climb. The main gate still wore faded red stencils: IMPERIAL NOTICE. DO NOT ENTER. ESPIRITAS POLICE SEAL. The ward-lines on the dead posts had been clipped years ago, but he could feel the old charge hanging in the ghost field like a tuning fork left humming. A place like this should have been someone’s by now. Ember Circle for the burners. Dock crews for the storage. Any half-bright outfit for the privacy. And yet it rotted.

“This place reeks of secrets,” he muttered. “I wonder why no one wants it.”

He slid through the low tear and let his steps find boards that remembered feet. Inside, shadows held their ground. He moved past vertical tanks banded with iron straps and warning sigils that had blurred into hieroglyphs: a skull with a third eye, a fishbone laid over a bolt, a hatched circle that once meant NO OPEN FLAME. Rust had turned seams to lace. Dust softened everything into one color.

The chemical storage hall gave up its door after a long, complaining shove. Crates sat in neat rows under slogans that lied—SOAP, CANDLES, WHALE FAT. A more recent stencil bled through when his thumb smudged the dust: a small five-point crown, a child’s idea of royalty. He wrote it into the notebook and dated it, then drew an arrow to a clipping about a warehouse fire that burned too clean.

He pried a lid. The straw inside carried a mold-sweet smell that tightened his throat. Beneath it, glass flasks, stoppered in hard wax, held clear liquids that showed themselves only by what they bent. One surface trembled without movement, surface tension trying to obey an instruction nobody had the right to give. He sealed it again and copied the crate number—knowing numbers here lied for a living.

Two aisles over, a drum's brass gauge lay spidered with a hairline crack, needle shivering at zero. He set his palm against the metal and felt a slow chill sink through skin. He pulled back and kept moving.

The overseer's office sat where bosses liked to pretend they could see everything: a mezzanine with windows on three sides, a door giving to a catwalk just wide enough for two men to hate each other shoulder to shoulder. The glass had gone to milk, but the room still held a shape: tables pushed into an L, a wall where pins had once mapped other people's luck. The door stuck and then agreed to be opened. Dust tried to make more noise than it had earned.

A ledger lay open, paper soft as old linen. Numbers marched into columns that ended in nothing; a dozen hands fighting for a single story. Under a paperweight, he found a sheaf of clippings saved by someone who preferred memory on paper: a paragraph about "a supplier off Hexspire whose name we cannot print," a transcript of an Imperial Police commendation, a sketch of Merrow with a caption that called him clever when it meant dangerous. He underlined the supplier line and wrote, SEE DOCK LIST, then turned to the wall.

String had rotted, but pins remained, teeth sunk deep into the wood. Circles around station names, triangles at docks, a ring around the plant. He held the notebook up and traced the pattern lightly, pencil whispering. A playing card lay face-down under a table leg. When he flipped it with his boot, The Fool looked back. He left it.

The rumor about tunnels had always been a rumor because men who bragged died before they learned to keep quiet. He found the first hint by accident: a draft where no draft should be, cold and clean, carrying a coin-sour smell. It breathed up through a square floor drain whose bolts had been painted red so often the paint itself should have counted as a seal. He pressed his ear to the iron and heard water moving a long way down. He sketched the room, marked the drain, and drew a second rough plan of the streets from memory: the canal a block east, the old city cut that carried ash-carts through the Night Market after curfew. He put a question mark where the two maps might kiss.

"Hey," a voice said behind him, small and too close. "You… you shouldn't be here. It's dangerous." Rabbit rose slow, hands empty, and measured the man the way a carpenter checks a plank: cuffs stained black, boots crusted where chemical bloom ate thread, a face that wore fear like an old bruise. Not a scav. Not a guard. Something in between—paid to keep the lights from falling, paid not to ask. "Dangerous," Rabbit said, letting the word settle. "That's why I'm here. What's the real story with this place?" The man's eyes moved to the corners as if the room had ears. His mouth worked around a thought; he swallowed it, lifted one shoulder in a helpless shrug, and walked away. Not fast. Fast made things chase. He was gone before Rabbit's second question could find its shape. Rabbit stood in the emptied conversation and listened to the plant speak in pressure and temperature. Somewhere below, a metal door rang once and stilled. He slid the notebook into his coat and headed for the outer walkways. The blocks around the plant had adopted its posture. Everything bent inward, everything watched. Rowhouses were brick shells with their insides scavenged: stair rails cut, window frames gone, floors stripped. Soot had left its fingers on every lintel. Shuttered shops insisted in flaking paint that they would reopen tomorrow. Once, this had been the city's working breath. Now it was a mouth that forgot to close.

On a long warehouse wall, someone had taken time they couldn't spare to paint a face that didn't belong to them: a perfect circle, two dots, a grin. Child-simple, cruel by implication. Under it, laughter written into the brick—JAJAJAJAJA—a cascade neat enough to have been stenciled. The edges were crisp. Not a relic. A message. He felt the sudden, stupid urge to scrub until mortar bled. Two doors down, an old woman in a dress the color of cooled tea swept water and grit off a stoop with a broom worn down to its bone. She didn't look up—she didn't need to. Most men told on themselves by how they stopped.

"Excuse me, miss," Rabbit said, voice pitched soft enough to ask without owing. "This area seems abandoned. Is it safe around here?"

She gave a short laugh, like the joke had been told before and buried its teller long ago. "Safe?" Only then did she lift her head. Her eyes had the thrift of someone who'd spent a lifetime guarding what she had left. She nodded at a crude grin painted on the wall. "You see that? Merrow Valesque's mark. He used to run these streets. Left his… signature… anywhere he pleased." Rabbit tipped his chin, a small invitation for more. "Merrow Valesque," he said evenly. "I've heard whispers. What do you know?" The broom slowed, bristles dragging in a lazy arc before coming still. She stared at the paint like it might start laughing. "Merrow…" She pressed her lips together. "He wasn't about coins or corners. It was… the noise fear makes. Bombings. Snatches in the dark. Doors broken before you were even awake to scream." Her eyes narrowed at the memory. "The Royal Gang followed him right into that hell. Half of 'em were ruined by his temper before the Imperial Police finally came in force. That was… months ago. One night, they swept the whole lot up. Cells full by morning."

"And after?" Rabbit asked.

Her voice thinned. "He broke out."

The words hit him like a nail tapped straight into bone. Rabbit kept his eyes on the wall, on the dribbling JAJAJAJAJA under the grin, so she wouldn't see his pulse in his throat. "People say?" he asked, careful to keep it light—as if this were tavern gossip, not his own confession. "People don't need to say," she murmured. Fear pulled her mouth tight. She leaned in, lowering her voice until the street itself seemed to hush for her. "You feel him. Like a draft under a door you thought was locked. I keep a kettle and a knife by the bed now. I don't sleep proper. The quiet's wrong—thin." Her eyes darted twice down the lane, the way prey checks the brush for eyes. "I shouldn't even be out here telling you this." He nodded like it was news, not the weight he already carried. "Is it safe in these blocks, at least?"

"It's quiet. That's not the same thing." She sniffed, shook her head. "Fear does the patrols better than any uniform. The Espiritas Police—" she spat the name like a seed—"they keep to their holy errands, won't cross here after dusk. And south of Crow's Ward… they've got their own rules. But safe?" She met his eyes. "Not while he's loose." Rabbit let that hang before he shifted. "The Royal Gang. What made them so hard to hold?" The broom moved again, slow swipes that stirred dust more than they cleared it. "They were smoke. Faces always changing. Names too. Merrow burned his own men like lamp oil—used them up, tossed what was left. If you displeased him, or if it was convenient…" She trailed off, gaze slipping past him to a year that hadn't finished with her. "There's one thing I can't forget. A fight out here. Merrow shouting—three of his turning on him, or maybe the other way. Couldn't tell. One of 'em cracks a canister. White smoke. I was half a street off and still caught it." Rabbit's eyes sharpened. "What did it smell like?" Her lids fluttered closed. "Sweet. Like cinnamon."

His hand found the spine of his notebook inside his coat. Without looking, he wrote the word in a margin already scarred with others. Underlined it twice. "What happened?" She opened her eyes, and for a moment they looked younger, rawer. "Hell," she said simply. "Things that weren't

there came crowding round. Shapes at the threshold. Faces in the panes. I ran in, locked every lock, and they followed me in anyway—inside my head. Demons, monsters… all the child tales with teeth. Sat with me all night. I still see them, if I let my mind idle. That smoke… it wasn't meant for fighting men. It was meant for everyone who could breathe." The broom bristled in her grip as she shivered. "Did you ever see them use the plant?" he asked—too quick. He tilted his head toward the looming stack of Crimson Chemicals to soften it. "Crates. Night carts. Anything that didn't belong."

"Crates came and went when it was busy," she said, wary now that his questions had shape. "Marked with ugly little signs. Laughing face shows up after, like the wall's sneering at you. I kept my head down. That's how you live long here." A child's cry thinned through the stairwell behind her, a fretful thread pulling her toward the door. "That'll be my granddaughter. I have to see to her."

"Thank you," Rabbit said. She nodded once—acknowledgment without warmth—and slipped inside. The broom's tip drew a last bright crescent in the dust before the door took the light. Rabbit stood alone with the echo of cinnamon on his tongue and the dull stink of the plant in his lungs. He wrote fast: white gas; hallucinogenic; crowd pacification by terror; Royal mark = laughing face; crates in/out; tunnels likely; locals too scared to claim ground. He glanced at the wet-looking JAJAJAJAJA and felt the old prickle at the base of his neck—the kind that told him a place remembered exactly what had been done to it.

As Rabbit's Foot moved deeper into the silent streets, the old woman's voice seemed to travel with him, a brittle whisper threading through the air between the empty buildings. The picture she'd painted—Merrow Valesque wielding fear with the precision of a craftsman, the Royal Gang sowing chaos with hallucinogenic smoke—clung to him like the lingering taste of rust after a nosebleed. It wasn't just the gas or the bloodshed. It was the method. The calculated way they had turned dread into a kind of currency. The Crimson Chemicals plant loomed in his mind now, no longer just an abandoned blot on the city's edge but a keystone in Doskvol's shadowed architecture. Whatever had been mixed, stored, or moved within its walls had been part of a machinery built to make the city shiver. And Merrow… he wasn't a man who let his tools go to waste. Here, the streets wore their neglect in layers. Boards nailed over windows sagged with water damage. Once-bright signs had dulled to the color of old parchment. "For Sale" placards hung like memorials rather than invitations, their corners curling in the damp air. Each step Rabbit took stirred the smell of rot and coal dust into something sour in his lungs. Still, some corner of his mind, the part that refused to be entirely cynical, whispered that with the right hands—and the right coin—this district could live again.

He was turning that thought over when movement caught his eye. The black-and-white cat. He'd seen it before today—twice, maybe three times. Always in the periphery. Once at the far end of an alley, watching him as he passed. Once darting across the street ahead of him. And now, here it was again, lingering at the curb just beyond the halo of a flickering gas lamp, its body half in shadow. It was a lean thing, built of angles and hesitation. The white patches on its fur were stained with city soot, the black dulled to charcoal. Its ribs shifted visibly when it breathed. Hunger lived in its eyes, yes—but something else too. Something fixed and attentive, like it was not simply looking at him but studying him. Rabbit slowed, crouching until his coat brushed the wet cobblestones. His knees ached as he lowered himself to its level. The cat didn't run. It didn't come closer either, just blinked at him, tail flicking in a slow, metronomic beat. He reached into his coat and found the heel of bread he'd meant to keep for later. He extended it, palm open, letting the animal make the choice. The cat stepped forward, careful and deliberate, its paws soundless. It sniffed the bread once, twice, then began to eat—small bites, pausing between each as if making sure the offering wouldn't be snatched away. The entire time, its eyes never left his.

When the bread was gone, Rabbit straightened, brushing crumbs from his fingers. He didn't look back as he continued his walk, his mind already returning to the plant, to the crates marked with mocking faces, to the cinnamon-scented smoke that could strip sanity away like peeling paint. The street lamps buzzed and guttered overhead, casting shadows that warped and stretched unnaturally across the pavement. The whole district felt as if it were holding its breath, waiting for something—or someone—to arrive. "For Sale" signs swung gently in the damp breeze, the hinges creaking like tired bones. Rabbit imagined another life for this place—a street humming with trade, safe enough for children to run its length without glancing over their shoulders. That vision held for a moment before reality pulled it apart, leaving him with only the echo of possibility. Behind him, the cat followed. It moved like water poured across stone, fluid and silent, keeping a steady distance no matter how he turned or paused. Its eyes caught the gaslight in quicksilver flashes, and in the uneven glow of the street, they almost seemed to burn. Whether it trailed him out of gratitude, hunger, or something else entirely, Rabbit couldn't say—because he never once noticed it was there.

Chapter 8: The Deadland Express

Jack watched the door ease shut behind Rabbit and felt the room slip a degree colder, like a stove going from flame to coals. The dog tracked the motion, then decided the house wasn't in danger and laid its head back on its paws. Harleena's attention hung on the doorway a beat longer, the kind of look a sentry gives a fog bank. Harry, still buzzing, couldn't let the spark die. "Train heist," he murmured, softer this time, tasting the words. "We can do it." Jack rolled a bent nail across his knuckles and let the plan settle into a shape he could say out loud. "Not in the yards," he said. "Not under the viaduct either. We take it just outside Doskvol—on the sweep that skirts the Deadland Woods before Gaddwick Station. There's a long curve where the driver feathers the throttle. We ride up on horses, catch the pace, step to the roof, and walk straight to the railcar we want. Quick hands, quiet feet. On and off before the Imperial Police lanterns even see their own breath." Harleena's eyes cut to him; the worry in them didn't blunt the iron. "Boarding a moving train on horseback." She set the rag aside like it was evidence. "Wet rails. Bad light. A slip becomes a headstone. One spooked mare and you're under wheels. And if anyone fires from the caboose, you're silhouettes against the sky—targets painted by God."

"Which is why we choose the spot," Jack said, calm as a card table. "The curve forces them slow. We pace them on the service track—the old survey road that parallels the rails for two miles. Not a sprint, a walk with conviction. Two riders up, two aside to steady the mounts. We climb when the iron sings steady." Harry had that thin, overbright smile he wore when he'd already started doing the math in his head. "Gloam Sisters have been seen along that belt since the station attack," he said. "Whispers say they've staked the shadows where the woods lean over the track. We might ride into their shawls."

"Then we nod our respects and keep our hands where they can count them," Jack said. "We're not touching their business. We take one crate and leave the ghosts their trees." Harleena's mouth made the small line it made when she didn't like a thing but couldn't prove it would kill you immediately. "You'll say you can pick the right railcar by smell. You can't. Not on a roof in rain. How do you even know where to drop down?" Jack tapped the nail twice on the table, each tick a neat, domestic metronome. "We don't guess. We put a man inside. A porter who drinks on credit, a night guard who hates his boots—someone we can hire for one favor, one time. He rides the freight out of Night Market and gives us the mark—a chalk sign on the roof seam above the right railcar. One X for the one we want, a bar for the hinge side. He unlatches the side door when we're overhead. We drop, slide the crate, vanish."

"The man inside can also sell you," Harleena said. "If he gets brave, or frightened, or both."

"Then I choose a man with fewer choices left," Jack answered. "And I stand close enough to his fear that he can feel me breathing when he earns his coin." A gust outside knocked rain against the new pane; the sound made the room feel thinner. Harry rubbed his hands together as if friction alone could cut a path through the problems. "And what about the woods themselves?" he said, the flippancy leaving him in a rush. "Last time we skirted that edge, we met things with horns and wings. Half-man, half-beast. If they wander farther out…"

"They won't be our enemies for long," Harry said quickly, seizing the thought that steadied him. "Rabbit can fix them now. The Ring—he can break curses clean. If those creatures were people once, he can pull them back. They might even—" He faltered, realizing he'd stepped into hope. "They might help us, after." Harleena's look was flint on stone. "After he nearly died wearing that thing?" She shook her head once. "Don't plan a job on a miracle. And even if he can free a monster from its skin, it doesn't mean the person inside owes us anything but a grave and a quiet place to shake." Jack kept his tone even. "We aren't counting on them. I'm saying the edge

won’t be as unfriendly as the stories. We pick a stretch with clear sightlines and no overhangs. If the Gloam Sisters are near, we treat the shade like a church. Hats off. Eyes down.” Harleena folded the rag, then unfolded it—a worry’s nervous prayer. “You still haven’t told me how we move a crate off the embankment without advertising it to half the district. Even if you board—which I am not blessing—you need a dray that can reach that cut, men to lift, a place to hide it, and a buyer brave enough to buy smoke without asking what made it.” Jack let a little grin show—bait for a table he intended to take. “I’ve got answers for most. The dray comes from the city—municipal green, borrowed off a depot whose clerk owes me two favors and a hat. Tarps, block and tackle, three lads with backs like doors—Mick can find them if we pay proper. As for the road, there’s an old culvert path that climbs from the drainage ditch to the survey track. It’ll take a careful wheel and a patient horse, but it’ll do. Hiding? We don’t, not here. We hand the crate to hands that can make it vanish.”

“Whose?” Harleena asked, already bracing. Jack let the name arrive the way good liquor did—slow, and then everywhere. “The Unseen.” Harry’s brightness snapped to ash. “The Shadewraith Clan?” He kept his voice down like saying it too loud might pull a shape through the wall. “Jack, no. They were… wrong. Those pale eyes. The way they moved. I still dream about—”

“Exactly,” Jack said, not unkind. “They move where men don’t look. Across a yard full of Imperial Police? Between arches? Downside of a lantern? They’re a rumor in a place built of rumors. Jackie Comber—the Mist—owes us at least a hearing after Marcio. We don’t need a parade, we need a disappearance. That’s their art.” Harleena’s gaze sharpened. “Or we put our necks under a knife we can’t see. And if the Espiritas Police follow the whisper trail back to our door, we don’t have the kind of doctrine that makes a priest look the other way.” Jack spread his hands, showing ten honest fingers and all the ways they were not. “We talk first. We offer coin and courtesy. They name a place where shadows fall thick and we roll our crate into it. They move it. They sell it. We get our cut and enough quiet to buy this house a spine.” Harry was still unconvinced, but curiosity pried at his fear. “Do you even know how to reach Comber?”

“Men who don’t want to be found have habits,” Jack said. “They leave cups unwashed in the same corners. They keep a beggar in front of a door that isn’t a door. I’ll start at Lantern Walk. There’s a boy there whose shoes never wear out. I’ll ask the questions you don’t hear with your ears.” Harleena’s eyes went to the ceiling and back—a quick prayer to a god who didn’t live indoors. “Even if your ghost friends pull a vanishing act, you still need a fence.”

“Fence before theft,” Jack said, pleased she’d brought him to the next rung. “Elsie at the Walk will buy the right shape of box no questions asked, if the Unseen escort it to her back stairs. If not Elsie, then Reeve at Shutter Court—he’ll buy anything wrapped in two lies and a song. We don’t open it here. We don’t label it here. We don’t love it. We lift it, pass it, get paid.”

“And the Imperial Police?” Harleena asked. “Gaddwick is a hornet’s nest since the attack. Lantern squads ride the platforms at night so the Chronicle can print their boots.”

“We’re not in the station,” Jack said. “We’re before it. Out on the sweep where the lanterns get lazy because the rain makes them spiteful. Two lookouts on the ridgeline for bobbing light. If we see uniforms at the milepost, we bite our bit and come back another night.” Harleena’s jaw flexed. “And if the Gloam Sisters are there.”

“Then we treat them like a tide,” Jack said. “We do not turn our backs. We do not raise our voices. We walk around the water and thank it for letting us pass.” She stared at him for a long moment, counting costs he couldn’t see. The dog watched her face like a compass. At last she said, “We do this without Rabbit unless he asks to come. He’s earned a day where every hammer isn’t a gun.” Jack inclined his head. “We build it to work with or without him. If he’s

there, he holds the ground at the cut and keeps the world from noticing us. If he's not, we don't change a step." Harry swallowed, then forced a thin grin.

"We try not to see them," Harleena corrected. "If seeing happens, we do not die for a principle. We survive and talk about mercy later." Jack pocketed the nail, felt the familiar itch of a plan that wanted to be real. "I'll find the inside man," he said. "I'll mark the chalk we need on the railcar roofs before the rain washes it. I'll listen around Lantern Walk for Comber's shadow and price Elsie's conscience. You—" he nodded at Harry "—tune the wire and lay out our stretch. Count trains. Time the curve. Bring me a number that isn't hope." Harleena took the dog's collar in two fingers and the animal rose as if the motion had been a word. "And I will find the dray and the men, on the condition that none of them talk in their sleep." She turned her gaze back to Jack. "One crate. One night. If the wind changes, we fold our pride and go home."

"One crate," Jack agreed. "We buy hinges that don't squeal. Then, when the house stops bleeding, we can talk about the Royal Family." The hammer down the corridor struck three neat beats, as if giving them a send-off. Jack scooped his string and shoved it into a pocket that had learned to forgive him, then glanced at the door Rabbit had taken. The house breathed in and out, wood and nails and a kettle somewhere daring to boil. Outside, Doskvol pulled its damp cloak tighter for evening. He would go into it with questions and come back with names. And if he had to shake hands with a shadow to keep the roof over their heads from learning the weather the hard way, then he would learn the proper grip.

Two days later the woods received them with that old, damp indifference—leaf-rot, iron in the breath, the hush that made even a bootstep feel like a trespass. Jack read the ground like a rider: where a hoof would slip, where it would sing. Harleena moved ahead of him by half a body, rifle slung, gaze in long, quiet sweeps that said she trusted trees about as far as they could be felled. "That bend," Jack said, parting a screen of wet fir. "Where the line skirts the Deadlands before it noses into Gaddwick. Ravine to the east, timber shoulder to the west. No matter who's on the throttle, the driver gives her mercy there. That's where we come alongside."

"On horses." Harleena didn't turn. She made the word sound like a thin ice test. "Good stock," he said. "Quiet hooves. We take the tender—the coal bin right behind the engine. I step across from the saddle while she's at fifteen instead of thirty. Talk to the whistle, ask the brakes for a conversation. Meanwhile you and Harry open the second car."

"The second car," she repeated. "Cargo."

"Mm. After the tender, before the silks." He lifted a hand, counting it out in the air. "Order runs: engine, tender, cargo, VIP, then the long herd of passengers. We're not touching the herd, and we only breathe on the VIP if the gods lay a purse in our lap and nobody's looking." She slowed, just enough that he drew level. "You already said you wanted eyes in the VIP. You've put someone there?"

"I have," Jack said.

"Is it wise to use him?" Her tone didn't ask who. It measured cost.

Jack let fir needles patter off his sleeve before answering. "Tobias Ford. The Nyctarch who carried me three meters toward a very bad story. He spoke to Harry in the air. Spoke to me in the noise." A breath. "Rabbit broke that curse when we came out again—clean. The bull, too. The man with the skull between his horns. Both of them back to their names." Harleena's jaw moved once at the mention of Rabbit, a muscle ticking like a clock hand. "And Ford wants to work off the debt."

“He came to us sober,” Jack said. “By the back alley, head down, hat in hand—real hat, human head. Said gratitude needs labor or it rots into shame. He wears a suit like a birthright and holds his knife with the right finger. We put him in a borrowed skin: high-collar, pin, watch chain. He rides the VIP and watches the silk for shadows that don’t belong. If Gloam Sisters show their gravity near the line—and they’ve been seen out here since Gaddwick burned—he sees it before we feel it. He’ll drop a signal. We shift the plan without laying hands on peacock throats.”

“Gloam Sisters don’t show,” Harleena said. “They arrive. By the time you name what you’ve seen, you’ve already given it your back.” Jack nodded. “Which is why Ford’s there to watch the room we’re not in. Which is why I board at the tender and not the boiler.” They broke onto a damp hollow where the trees leaned toward each other as if conferring. The place they’d found Marcio was still a clearing if you went by shape, but everything human had been combed out of it. The leaf shelter, the flattened bag, the small, careful stack of ash—gone. Only scuffed soil, a paler square, a memory of smoke. Harleena stopped first. “No Shadewraith Clan.”

“And no body,” Jack said. He crouched, set two fingers to the dirt where the fire ring had been. Cold. Dry. The footprints left behind were the kind that only wanted to be half-remembered—soft soles, careful weight. “Comber keeps his promises.” She scanned the tree line, slow. “Say the rest of your scheme. While the woods are listening.” Jack rose and let his eyes map the clearing like a room he intended to rent. “We lift what we can carry from the cargo. If a crate says it wants a crow’s attention—false labels, the little crown, that laughing face that’s been showing up on walls—we don’t drag it through town like a wedding. We ask the Unseen to give us an hour’s vault in these trees. A place to set the box down, open it quiet, decide if we’ve stolen coin or a curse. Then we move it by mule team up the logging track, no ruts, no witnesses.”

“And their price?”

“Information they already half-know,” he said. “A foreman’s tavern, a signature that changed hands, which manifest smells like lies. Nothing that burns a bridge we intend to walk again.” He shrugged. “And the comfort of knowing we’ll look the other way when their shadows cross ours for three minutes.”

“You’re asking them to be veil and warehouse.” Harleena’s voice didn’t lift. “They’ll wonder why the Crows can’t be both for themselves.”

“Because the Espiritas Police prick the rails and their pins hum through the whole net,” Jack said. “Because the Imperial Police make arithmetic of stolen freight and start the sum with dockers and yard-rats and the usual sinners. The Unseen aren’t on anyone’s paper. They’re rumor. And if the Sisters do throw their shade across the timberline—well, I’d rather Comber’s shadows talk to those ghosts than ours.” She crouched, pressed two fingers into the earth, brought them up clean. “We still don’t have a fence we trust,” she said. “Still don’t have a cart that doesn’t leave a story in the mud. Still don’t have a safe room for opening a box that might cough in our faces.”

“Hiding,” Jack counted off, “Unseen, if they let us pay the rent. Moving—mules waiting two ridges over, tarps cached, block-and-tackle stowed tonight. Selling—after we know what we’re holding. We choose the crate with our eyes, not our appetite. If it carries the little crown or a laugh, we take the smallest, richest piece and leave the rest to the forest for an hour.”

“And Ford in the VIP,” she said, as if testing a rung with her weight. “A man we only met while he was a monster.”

“He met us that way, too,” Jack said. “Then Rabbit put him back in his name. He owes us, but not like a collar. Like a favor you pay first so you can look a man in the face after. He’ll see the

Sisters if they're there. He'll hear a guard's nerves fray before a hand shakes. He can tell which rich man will make himself a hero and which will melt. That's worth a seat."

They crossed to where the leaf-shelter had been. A splinter in the ground still held a single strand of dark-red hair, small as a blood thread. Jack touched the splinter with two fingers and left the hair where it was. He palmed a folded square of dark cloth from his coat and pinned it to a leaning oak with a bone pin whose head had been tied into a tiny knot—a fish-eye that never closed. Harleena's eyebrow twitched. "Their language?"

"Parley," Jack said. "Here. Nightfall. With the man who owes them a debt. It doesn't say which man."

"And if the ones who come aren't the ones we want?"

"Then we apologize to the tree for wasting its time and we go home."

She straightened and swept the clearing with that long, slow look. "Harry believes Rabbit can undo more of those curses if we meet them again," she said. "Says the bull-man—the minotaur—walked away with a human name after. Thinks that buys us help if it comes to it. Horses, lifts, silence."

"Gratitude spends like coin," Jack said. "It can buy you a door held open. It can also buy you a seat in some other bastard's nightmares if you take too much of it. We'll keep the debt small."

"Good," she said. The light above them thinned, as if the sky had leaned on its elbows. Jack rested a shoulder against the oak and let the plan run its groove in his mind: the tender's black lip under his boots, the driver's face when the whistle lied to him, the soft thud of a parcel into moss, a shadow's hand taking a handle because you asked the right way. He counted the enemies he couldn't see, the way a gambler touches the cards he hasn't turned: the Gloam Sisters in the timber, the Espiritas sanctifying the rails, the Imperial Police polishing questions, the Ember Circle sniffing freight. And Merrow—always Merrow—who was an enemy even when other names filled a mouth. "If Comber's lot are near," he said, mostly to the bark, "they'll come like a draft under a shut door." Harleena nodded once. "Then we listen for the cold."

Jack felt the prickle first—a pressure change along the scalp that said a door had opened somewhere without hinges. He stilled. Harleena was already watching a fixed seam of shade two trees ahead, chin notched toward it, weight shifted like a hunter who'd seen the blink. Between the boles, the dark had chosen a shape. A man's outline in thin glass, the forest showing through wrong at the edges. Two pale points where eyes should be held without blinking. A Shadewraith Clan, patient as frost. "Parley," Jack said, hands open from the wrists. "Message for the Mist. Jackie Comber. We ask for one minute of his weather." It did not answer. It did not need to. It thinned to nothing, reassembled deeper in—a shoulder, a tilt of head, the light misbehaving—and folded again. A path made of absence. They followed at the pace the woods allowed: no hurry, no bravado, boots testing root and rot with equal courtesy.

The canopy loosened into a kept place, cool without wind, the ghost field so near the skin it caught on breath. An ancient tree shouldered the center, trunk furrowed, roots rising like the backs of sleeping animals before diving again. Hollow mouths in the bark opened inward—rooms, not wounds. A low fire worked in a shallow ring, more attention than heat. Four figures moved around it the way people do when work is old and shared: a woman fletching shafts with a knife that never lost count; a boy polishing brass tokens until they shone like small moons; a man chalking spirals along a root with a mapmaker's patience; another sorting cord into knots that either held like vows or pulled free like a lie. He stepped into their measure as if he'd been standing there all along.

Shirtless, where even ghosts shivered. Overalls hung by one stubborn strap. Patches had lost their war with his trousers; holes gnawed the cloth as if rats—or worse—had eaten through. Soot dusted his skin; alley scrapes had scabbed and re-scabbed. Rubber sandals slapped over mismatched socks, the left with a crescent rip that let a crooked big toe glare at the world. He smelled of moldy brick, spirit ash, and the metallic bite of burnt ozone. And yet he moved like fog—soundless, half-there until suddenly all of it. A thousand-yard stare lived in his pale eyes, not broken—busy. Hair knotted like a dockline left in brine. “Jack,” he said, mild as ash. “Harleena.” No hello. “Come in. The trees gossip if I make you shout.”

They didn’t sit. He didn’t ask them to. Two more Shadewraith Clan pressed to the bark like outlines borrowed from the wrong hour of day; a third drifted where the canopy seemed thicker; a fourth slid along the ground-litter like dusk learning to walk. Harleena clocked each one without moving her head. The count kept rising. It put a cold coin under the tongue and left it there. Jack inclined, giving nothing, respecting everything. “We need your help,” he said plainly. “Yours, Mister Comber. The Unseen’s.” Comber tipped his head, as if listening to a kettle decide to boil. “Do you?” The corner of his mouth moved—humor without warmth. “And why would I help the Crows.” He said the name like a man tasting a street rumor he didn’t intend to swallow.

“Because the task is small and the noise is smaller,” Jack answered. “There’s a train, two nights from now. We don’t want the passengers. We don’t want a legend. We want one crate and an hour’s shade.” He lifted a hand, sketching the run with a gambler’s economy. “Engine. Tender with coal. Then a cargo car. Then a VIP. Then the rows for the rest. We catch it by horse at the bend where the line gives the Deadlands its respectful berth, just before Gaddwick. I board at the tender and ask the brakes for half their pride. Harleena and Harry open cargo. We lift only what a back can carry without telling a street about it. Then we look at it under a curtain, not a lamp—here, if you let us, or where you prefer. We find out if we stole a coin or a curse. Then we leave nothing you didn’t consent to.” Harleena’s voice had the clean edge of a whetted blade. “And in case you’re wondering, we saw three Clan in the trees on the way in. I’m counting six now. If any more take an interest, you’ll run out of bark to glue them to.”

Comber’s eyes flicked past her shoulder, very slightly amused. “You noticed six. Good. There are eight.” He poured tea from a cracked enamel kettle into three cups that had never met each other before. Steam lifted in a white thread and frayed into the hush. “Looks like ditch-water, tastes like leaves. Keep your hands where you left them.” He didn’t drink. “Why help you,” he went on, returning to his first question like a knife returning to a whetstone. “And not the men who will come after you, louder.”

“Because we’ll pay you in silence,” Jack said. “In questions answered before they’re asked. Which foreman drinks where. Which manifest lies politely. Which ledger smiles too straight. And because we’ll be in and out before your shadows get bored. We aren’t asking you to raise a banner. We’re asking to borrow a corner of the night.” Comber looked away from them as if tracing a sound through the wood. His gaze fell on a girl seated beyond the fire’s reach, half-hidden by a root. Silver hair caught what little light there was and gave it back with a stranger glow. Fifteen by appearance, and yet the calm in her smile belonged to someone who had waited much longer than any clock allowed. She had been watching the whole time, bright-eyed and still, as if the conversation were a play she had already seen and was waiting to catch the missed line. Comber’s look touched her—brief, familiar—and returned. Harleena marked the exchange and filed it with the same care she gave to clean weapons. “Do you believe in destiny,” Comber asked, mild as before. Not a challenge. A weather report. “We’ve heard,” Harleena said, not rising to the bait, “that the Unseen have a way of seeing what’s coming when the rest of us are still tying our boots.”

“People hear many things,” he said, and let the smoke answer for him. Jack set his cup down untouched. “Marcio,” he said. “We saw him. We heard what he asked. Has he—” Comber’s pale

eyes softened without turning kind. “He did what he was supposed to. So did I. His last wish stands. The delivery will be honored.” He let the last word sit between them, heavy as a pin in a map. Harleena’s breathing thinned, then steadied. The shadows around the Grove kept their slow patrol: a blur where no blur should be; a darker fold at the corner of sight; a pressure like fingers tapping the air just above a shoulder. Jack lifted his hand again, smaller this time, the pitch pared to bone. “All we want is somewhere to set a box for one hour and look at what we’ve risked. Not to move through your walls. Not to make your name our banner. An hour’s shade. We’ll owe you in questions answered, and in staying out of your light when the city decides to look.” Comber’s gaze slid back to the silver-haired girl. She didn’t speak; she only smiled, and the Grove seemed to lean an inch toward that light. He rubbed his thumb along the rim of his cup, then set it down.

“And if fate thinks badly?” Harleena asked. “Destiny,” Comber said, voice rough as gravel but steady, “isn’t magic. It’s just the road you’ve been walking without realizing it. Every step you take narrows the choices ahead. You don’t see the path until you look back. But the truth is—you’ve already chosen.” Jack kept his stare locked on him. “Then let us choose a piece of it with you.” The fire threw strange shadows across Comber’s face, catching in the hollow of his collarbone and the dust along his shoulders. His eyes, for all their wildness, were sharp. “I’m helping you because you’re not finished yet,” he said plainly. “You’ve got something ahead of you that no one else can do. And the way you handle this train is a test. Not for me—for the world that’s watching.” Jack’s jaw flexed. “A test of what?”

“Of whether you can keep what you take,” Comber said. “Of whether your little crew can snatch a prize without losing each other in the smoke.” Jack gave a dry chuckle. “That’s a fairer answer than most I’ve heard tonight.” From a pocket in his ragged overalls, Comber drew out something small: a gem clear as water, but with black liquid shifting inside like smoke that wanted to be oil. He rolled it once across his palm, then let it gleam in the firelight. Comber handed the gem to Jack, the black liquid inside moving like a storm bottled too tight. “You’ll ride out to the bend before Gaddwick,” he said. “That’s the cleanest spot to reach the train before the station swallows it. Keep your lamps dark. Kill every flame before you move. When you’ve got your prize, set it aside—inside the car, or out on the ground, it makes no difference. Then break that gem. In the dark, my shadows will come. They’ll lift what you can’t, and they’ll keep it hidden until you’re ready to claim it. Simple as that.” Harleena had gone quiet, her eyes sweeping past Comber into the line of trees. At first it had looked like trunks and bark, but now that she’d found the trick of it, she saw the figures—one after another, standing motionless, their faint outlines cut from darkness itself. The Shadewraith Clan. Watching. Listening. Their eyes caught the faintest gleam, pale as quartz. Too many of them. Too close. Her hand brushed her rifle strap, half-ready. “Your… friends,” she said quietly. “They’re nearly breathing down our necks.”

“They keep order here,” Comber said, calm, as if he hadn’t noticed her unease. “Make sure no one lies. Make sure I stay honest enough to live another day.” Jack rolled the gem in his palm. It was colder than the night air, heavier than its size should allow. “Two nights from now,” he said. “That’s when we move.”

“Two nights,” Comber confirmed. “But listen to me: if the Gloam Sisters have put their hands on that stretch of wood—and they’ve been prowling heavily since Gaddwick—you’ll feel it. The air will go thick. Your boots will feel nailed to the dirt. If that happens, you don’t fight it. You walk away and try another night. Better to lose the job than to lose yourselves.” Jack gave a tight nod. “And after?”

“After,” Comber said, and this time his voice left no room for mystery. “After you’ve pulled it off and stacked your coin, you come back here. Because I’ve got something for you. Something you’re meant to see. Call it a job, call it a message, call it fate—it doesn’t matter. It waits for you, and it won’t wait forever.” Jack frowned. “Can you tell us what it is?” Comber shook his head.

“Not yet. You wouldn’t carry it right now. You’d stumble into that train with your thoughts weighed down, and you’d lose. Better you rob clean, make your money, and then shoulder what comes next. That’s the order of it.” Harleena’s lips pressed thin. “You sound like a priest who lost his book and is just making it up.”

“I sound like a man who’s already seen the next page,” Comber replied. His eyes had that faraway depth again, the stare of someone standing in two places at once. “Believe me or don’t. But you’ll come back. That much isn't a choice—it’s already written.” Jack felt the urge to argue, but let it drop. He knew when a man had said his last word. “Marcio,” he asked once more, instead. “What about him?” For the first time, Comber’s expression softened, if only by a hair. His eyes moved past them, not at the Clan but through them, as if he could still see Marcio’s shadow somewhere in the treeline. “He did his part. Exactly what was asked of him. His last wish was to have his body returned. It will be done. You can count on that. I already said as much” The fire popped, spitting resin, and silence settled thick around them. Harleena kept her eyes on the shadows, still too aware of the quiet watchers. Jack closed his fist tight around the gem until it bit into his palm. “We’re done here,” Jack said finally. He gave Comber a small nod, a gambler’s respect. “We’ll take our shot, make our coin, and then we’ll come back for whatever door you’re waiting to open.” Comber lifted two fingers, neither blessing nor curse, just a sign to be gone. “Leave the way you came. Don’t try to learn paths that aren’t yours.” Jack and Harleena turned. The fire dimmed behind them. Their footprints blurred after the first step, gone after the second. The shadows melted back into trunks and branches, leaving only the smell of smoke and pine. When the woods grew less heavy, Jack finally spoke. “What in all the saints’ wrong pockets was that?”

“Too many shadows, too close,” Harleena said. “And a man who thinks fate pays his rent.” She adjusted her rifle strap, but her voice stayed edged. “I don’t trust the Unseen. Not for a heartbeat. They give with one hand and take double with the other.”

“They’re still good at hiding things,” Jack said, rubbing his thumb over the gem in his pocket. “That’s all we need right now.”

“And a debt later,” she reminded him. He blew out a breath. “Every deal’s a debt. The trick’s paying it late enough that the interest doesn’t kill you.” She glanced sideways at him. “You kept looking at the girl.”

“So did you,” Jack said. “And she kept smiling like she knew something we didn’t.” Harleena nodded once, sharp. “Which means she matters.” Jack shook his head, half in frustration, half in wonder. “Who is she?” he muttered. Then, after a beat: “Never mind. After.”

“After,” Harleena echoed, though the word carried no comfort. She cast one last look behind them. The fire was gone, swallowed by the trees. Jack tugged his coat tighter. “Let’s go plan a train robbery before destiny changes its mind.” They pressed on toward the city, boots crunching on pine needles, voices dropping into the steady rhythm of strategy: the bend at Gaddwick, the coal car ladder, the crawl along the roof, Tobias dressed as velvet nobility in the VIP car. And always, the gem in Jack’s pocket, cold as stone, promising shadows that would carry their prize into the dark.

Two days later, the Deadlands were quiet except for the iron thunder rolling up the tracks. The three of them sat their horses at the treeline, silhouettes against the pale wash of moonlight. No fine gear, no circus of costumes—plain wool coats, trousers dulled with dirt, boots stained by mud. Each wore a handkerchief pulled over their mouths, rough cloth turned into outlaw masks, their eyes the only clear thing about them. The horses stamped nervously at the rails’ distant rumble. The air itself seemed to vibrate. The train was coming. First came the sound—low, metallic, a growl building in the bones of the earth. Then the smoke, black columns

smearing into the sky. Then, at last, the beast itself: the great engine, headlamp glaring like an angry eye, steel wheels biting sparks off the rails as it tore down the line. Behind it, a long tail of railcars, each shuddering under its own weight, each packed with secrets. Jack spat once into the dirt and adjusted the gloves on his hands. His gaze flicked to Harleena. She had her rifle lashed across her back, her body taut in the saddle, eyes narrowed and sharp as glass. Harry, to Jack's other side, looked jittery—young, restless—but his grip on the reins was tight, jaw clenched beneath his mask. Three riders. One plan. No turning back now.

Jack gave them a look—the last chance to pull out, to admit the madness of chasing down a train in the dead of night. But none of them flinched. Harleena tipped her chin, steady and cold. Harry gave the smallest nod, lips pressing into a determined line. That was enough. Jack raised his hand. Then dropped it. They spurred their horses forward. The world jolted into speed. Hooves pounded the earth, rattling the ground as the train roared closer. The night split into motion and thunder—metal wheels shrieking, horses snorting clouds of steam, hearts hammering in time with the rails. The train shot past them like a streak of lightning. They swung their mounts parallel, close enough to feel the heat from the engine's firebox and smell the bitter coal smoke rolling out in waves. The air was thick with cinders that stung the eyes and burned the throat. Jack leaned low in the saddle, his mask plastered to his face with sweat. He picked his spot: the second car, the coal tender, black and heaving as the engine devoured its fuel. He judged the sway, the speed, the distance. His heart slammed like a drum. Then he kicked out of the stirrup, grabbed the metal rung, and tore himself free of the horse. Steel bit his palms, the train dragging him forward like it meant to shake him off. His boots slammed into the side, scraping sparks before they found purchase. For a breath it felt like falling forever, then his leg swung up, his body clambered, and he rolled onto the roof of the coal car. Grit rained into his mouth, choking, but he was aboard. Harleena and Harry went for the third car—the cargo. Harleena guided her horse in close with a surgeon's precision. She rose in her saddle, one hand steadying the reins, the other reaching for the iron ladder bolted to the side. The train screamed under her, but her boots found the rung like they'd been waiting for her. She climbed with speed, hauling herself up onto the roof, rifle clattering against her shoulder. She landed in a crouch, balanced, alive. Harry wasn't as graceful. His horse nearly balked at the thunder, but he growled through his teeth, pulled hard on the reins, and flung himself at the ladder. His boot slipped, caught again, his chest slammed against the iron. For a second he dangled, rag-dolling against the side of the train. Then his arms burned, his teeth clenched, and he dragged himself up rung by rung until he sprawled onto the roof beside Harleena, chest heaving. The three of them had made it. Different cars, different jobs, one machine roaring beneath them like a living thing that wanted to buck them all off. Jack, balanced atop the coal car, looked back once. Harleena met his gaze from the cargo car, her rifle now in hand, hair whipping in the wind. Harry crouched beside her, already fumbling with the satchel of tools, his nerves written in the quick tremble of his hands. For a moment they held each other's eyes across the screaming gap of steel and speed. A silent pact. One look. One nod. Then they split—Jack to the front, Harleena and Harry to the belly of the train.

The group split like an arrowhead, each to their mark. But before they could vanish into their roles, the air ripped with the sound of a gunshot. One sharp crack, echoing off the steel walls of the railcars somewhere behind them. The noise carried forward over the grinding wheels, over the scream of iron, over the pounding of the engine. It was a sound that didn't belong—not in the steady rhythm of a train running clean. All three of them heard it. Harleena's head snapped around, her eyes narrowing, rifle strap tightening against her shoulder. Harry cursed under his breath, teeth clenched. Jack said nothing, but inside his stomach pitched. A shot that far down the line could only mean one thing: Tobias. The half-man, half-bat, dressed now in borrowed velvet, playing the high-class passenger in the VIP car. Jack had counted on him. Hell, the whole plan leaned on him being in position, eyes open, ears sharper than any normal man's. One shot could mean the cover was blown, or that Tobias had been cornered before he'd even had a chance to play his role.

Stay alive, Jack thought as his boots hit the roof of the coal car. *Whatever that was, you'd better still be standing when I come back for you.*

The plan was already moving, and momentum was a river you couldn't swim against. Tobias had to fend for himself for now. Jack's job was to make sure the engine stopped before this entire affair barreled straight into town. He pulled his mask down from his face and stuffed it into his coat. No bandit now, not to the eyes of whoever waited inside that cabin. He needed to look like something official, something dangerous, something unquestionable. The engine cabin door rattled under his hand, hot steel and grit on the handle. He shoved it open and stepped inside. The heat slammed him first. The firebox roared like a starving beast, spilling light and ash across the walls. It was an oven, choking with the stink of coal and sweat. The driver sat in his chair, a wiry man with a long, narrow jaw and grease in his hair. His eyes went wide the second Jack entered. By the furnace, his assistant straightened, shovel in hand, muscles gleaming with sweat under his shirt, the glow of the fire painting him in bloody orange.

"What the hell was that?" the driver snapped, voice cutting through the hammer of the pistons. Jack's boots rang on the steel floor as he stepped in, sharp, fast, eyes hard. He pitched his voice low, commanding, the tone of someone who didn't ask but *ordered*. "Didn't you hear it? A shot. Something's happening down the line. Stop this train immediately. Captain Ishtar sent urgent word—there's an ambush waiting." The name hung in the air like a blade. He knew it would. The assistant narrowed his eyes, shovel lowering but not gone. His knuckles whitened on the handle. "Ambush? That don't make sense. And how the hell did *you* get here so fast? We only just heard the shot." Jack's heart thundered. His tongue flicked, sharp as a knife. He leaned forward just enough to make them feel it. "Because I'm very good at my job. Better than either of you, by the look of things. What's the matter—don't trust the Imperial Police when they tell you you're running into your own death?" The driver hesitated, eyes flicking to his assistant. Doubt sat heavy between them. Jack felt the moment stretch taut like a rope ready to snap. He needed them to believe—but the pause was too long. "Wait a damn minute," the driver growled, rising from his seat. "You're no—"

The shovel came swinging before he finished. Jack ducked, the iron singing past his ear, close enough to stir the hair at his temple. His shoulder hit the driver's knees, knocking the man from his chair. They went down hard, Jack's fingers clawing for purchase, grappling with wiry muscle and a man's panic made mean. The driver snarled, trying to drag Jack down with him, fists punching into ribs, knees jerking upward. The assistant bellowed and came in with the shovel again. The air cracked with its weight as it slammed down. Jack twisted, felt the rush of heat on his back as it barely missed, the clang against the floor deafening in the tight space. He couldn't hold both. Couldn't talk his way out now. This was down to raw grit. Jack slammed the driver against the brass dials, glass gauges shattering with a hiss of escaping steam. Hot air sprayed across his face, stinging like wasps. The driver howled and clawed at Jack's eyes. Jack jerked his head down, forehead smashing into the man's nose. A sick crunch. Blood spilled, hot and wet, across Jack's brow. The shovel came again. Jack let the driver's collapsing weight drag him sideways, using the man's body as a shield. The iron crashed into the driver's shoulder with a meaty crack, and the man screamed, rolling away. Jack lunged at the assistant. Both hands seized the shovel's shaft, wood biting splinters into his palms. They wrestled, faces close, teeth bared, the firebox at Jack's back spilling unbearable heat. The assistant was stronger, every muscle straining, pushing Jack closer to the open maw of the furnace. The smell of burning coal filled his lungs. The edges of his coat began to smoke.

Jack's mind shrieked. *Not like this. Not in the fire.* He let go with one hand, snapping his fist upward into the man's throat. The assistant gagged, stumbling. Jack tore the shovel free and swung the flat of it sideways. Iron met temple with a hollow, ringing crack. The man dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, sprawling across the steel floor. Jack stood heaving, chest on fire, lungs scoured raw with coal smoke. The cabin felt too small, too hot, the fire breathing down his

neck. The driver moaned from the floor, clutching his ruined nose, blood slicking his face. The assistant twitched, groaned, but didn't rise. Jack spat into the furnace, the saliva hissing on the coals, then staggered forward. He grabbed the two men one by one, dragging them to the rear corner of the cabin. Rope came from his satchel, fast hands binding wrists and ankles, jerking the knots until they left skin blanched and angry. Gags shoved between their teeth muffled their curses. When the last knot was cinched, Jack sat back on his heels, breathing like he'd run a mile. His arms shook from the fight. Blood and sweat mixed on his brow, dripping into his eyes. The shovel leaned against the wall, stained dark at the edge. The two men glared up at him, one broken and bleeding, the other groaning in half-consciousness. Their hate was a weight in the room, but their fight was gone. Jack wiped his sleeve across his face, smearing the blood into soot, then gave them a crooked smirk. "Lucky for you," he muttered, voice raw, "I'm very good at my job." He turned then, put both hands on the throttle, and pulled. The engine roared in his grip, steel and fire answering to him now. The train was his.

The cargo hold was a coffin of steel and wood, narrow walls pressed in by crates stacked three-high, chains rattling as the train thundered on. The air was thick with coal dust and the sharp reek of oiled metal, every bump and sway of the rail threatening to crush them between iron ribs and timber ribs. Harleena's lantern swung from her hand, casting fever-bright light across the symbols painted on the crates—some scrawled in chalk, some branded deep in wood. She froze, the light catching one mark in particular. A jagged sigil she'd seen before, chalked on alley doors in Ashvale: the Cyphers. A few feet away, another crate bore the spiral flame of the Circle. Then, half-hidden behind chains, the curling knot that whispered of the Gloam Sisters. "Bloody saints," she muttered. "This isn't cargo. It's a bloody faction war in a box."

Harry crouched low, inspecting the chains that bound the boxes to the walls. His hands ran over the cold iron links, jaw tightening. "This is going to be tricky," he said. "Look, Harleena—these boxes aren't just stacked, they're chained to the bloody car itself. Whoever packed this didn't want them moving. Not without a fight." They set to work, prying at bolts, tugging at chains that clattered against the wood with every wrench. Sweat slicked their palms, the effort mixing with the constant sway of the train. Harleena dug her knife under a bolt, teeth gritted as she twisted. Harry leaned into a stubborn lock, shoulder straining, every movement loud against the roar of the train. Then the lantern-light shifted—and something shifted with it. From the shadows between crates, it leaped.

A monkey, or what might've once been one, its flesh sagging like wax left in the sun, mottled with rot. But from its back sprouted wings, ragged eagle pinions matted with gore, feathers clinging in diseased clumps. Its eyes glowed like wet coals, and its jaw split too wide, shrieking as it launched. It hit Harry full-force, claws hooking the back of his head, wings beating wild. He staggered sideways into the crates, skull cracking against wood, the lantern swinging madly. "Harry!" Harleena lunged, slashing with her knife, but the creature moved like something driven by hunger alone, heedless of pain. Her blade dug into its side, carving rancid flesh—no flinch, no scream, just a snarling grip as its claws dug deeper. Harry roared, trying to pry it free, but the claws hooked into his scalp, dragging blood down the back of his neck. The stench of rot filled his nose, gagging him. He smashed himself against the wall once, twice, trying to break it loose. The monkey clung tighter, teeth biting at his ear, tearing. Harleena jammed the butt of her rifle into its ribs with a brutal crack. Again. Again. Bone splintered under the blow, but still it didn't stop. She felt her own panic rising, chest tight, knowing this wasn't some living thing they could beat into quitting.

The creature screeched, wings flaring wide in the cramped space, striking Harleena in the face, snapping her head back with the blow. Blood slicked her lip. Her vision blurred, but she swung again, knife slashing, wood and iron rattling all around them. Harry dropped to one knee, vision swimming red. His fingers dug into the filthy fur, trying to rip it free, but it was like trying to pull

nails from his own skull. His chest burned, panic gnawing at the edges. It wasn't going to stop. Not until one of them was dead. Then—desperation. He had one card left. He sucked in a breath that rattled his chest and let it out in a guttural word, old syllables tasting like ash and copper. His hand, slick with blood, pressed against the thing's chest, and he pushed—not with muscle, but with will. A surge of crackling blue energy sparked between skin and rot, sizzling through the monkey's ribcage. The creature shrieked, not in pain but in *recognition*. Its eyes flared, then softened, glassy. Its claws loosened, grip faltering. Harleena froze, blade raised, as the monkey's wings beat once, twice, then folded close. Harry's voice was hoarse, raw. "Mine now."

The thing hissed, a ragged sound like wind through dead feathers, then tore itself from his back. It crawled to the window grate, wings bursting wide, and with a single beat it was gone, vanishing into the night sky. Harry collapsed against the wall, chest heaving, blood trailing down his collar. Harleena slid to his side, checking the bleeding scalp, her own jaw aching from the strike she'd taken. "That'll last for a moment," Harry rasped, eyes hollow. "But a moment's enough." She let out a breath, shaky, and pressed her sleeve against his wound. "Remind me never to piss you off." The train lurched beneath them. Slowing. Grinding. The roar of the engine dulled. They both froze, eyes meeting in the flicker of the lantern. "He's done it," Harleena breathed. "Jack's stopped the bloody thing." The noise of the wheels softened, until the entire train groaned to a halt. The trees outside loomed black and endless—the edge of the Deadland Woods, just where they needed it. Harry pushed himself upright, swaying, wiping blood from his temple. "Then we'd better do our part." Together, they turned back to the cargo. Chains loosened, bolts half-pried. They went at it again, pulling boxes free one by one. The sigils glared back at them in the lamplight—Cyphers, Circle, Sisters—all staring, silent, waiting. Harleena spat blood on the floor and muttered, "Saints help us, whatever's in these crates better be worth it." The train was theirs. The danger was far from over.

Jack clambered down from the engine, breath still ragged from the fight with the driver and his mate, and hurried through the couplings until he found the third car. He slid the door open and stepped inside, lantern-light falling across Harleena's pale cheek and Harry's blood-matted hair. His gut twisted at the sight. "What happened to—" Harry cut him off, voice sharp but steady. "I'm fine. Don't waste the time. We need to get these chains off before anyone comes sniffing. Here—" He shoved a heavy cutter into Jack's hands, iron jaws gaping like the bite of a guillotine. Jack caught it, weighed it, then nodded once. "Alright. Let's crack their teeth."

The three of them set to work. Steel shrieked as the cutter chewed into links, sparks leaping when chain met bolt too hard. Harleena leaned her whole weight into a stubborn knot of iron, grunting under the strain, sweat shining on her temple. Harry, still swaying slightly from his head wound, hacked with desperate rhythm, cutting and wrenching at locks until his knuckles bled. Jack worked with grim focus, every snap of a link like a heartbeat closer to freedom. One by one the crates shook loose, heavy with their secrets. The painted sigils glared in the lantern glow—spirals, knots, symbols half-burned into the wood. The weight of them felt heavier than stone. Harry wiped his brow, breath rasping. "That's enough. Those are the ones." He looked at Jack, something tense in his eyes. "Time to call your ghosts." Jack froze a moment, hand drifting to his pocket. He felt the gem there—the clear glass sphere with its dark liquid twisting inside. Cold against his fingers, heavier than its size should allow. He turned it once in his palm, letting the others see it, and for the first time tonight he felt the edge of hesitation. "Lights out," he said, voice low but firm.

Harleena moved quick, snuffing the lantern, shadows snapping tight across the car. Harry staggered to the little windows, dragging tarps and broken boards to cover them. The world closed in black, only the echo of their breathing filling the car. Jack held the gem up, just barely seeing its dark gleam. He whispered, not to them, but maybe to himself: "Hope this bloody works." Then he hurled it down. The gem shattered sharp as ice. Black liquid spread across the

floorboards, and instantly the air changed—electric, heavy. Jack's skin prickled; every hair on his arms stood on end. His breath caught in his throat. The darkness around them wasn't just absence anymore—it had *weight*. Something moved. Shapes uncoiled from corners that weren't there a heartbeat before. Figures in the dark, men-shaped but not men, born from shadow itself. The Shadewraith Clan. Their outlines shimmered as if seen through water, features indistinct, but their presence undeniable. Cold seeped into the car, filling the lungs, numbing the fingers.

Harry swallowed, the sound loud in the silence. His grip on the cutter turned white-knuckled. Jack forced his hand up, pointing at the freed crates. His voice was rough, but steady. "Those. That's them. Take them." The shadows turned. Not fast—slow, deliberate, like predators choosing not to hurry. One after another, they regarded the boxes. The silence stretched, the only sound the faint creak of the train's frame cooling in the night air. Then—without a word, without a gesture—they vanished. The dark lightened at once, as though something had lifted. The air warmed; the pressure drained away. Harleena's lantern sputtered back to life the moment she struck it, flame eager, unopposed.

The cargo hold looked empty. The freed crates were gone. For a long breath, none of them moved. Jack's pulse thudded in his ears, sweat drying on his temple. He finally exhaled and let his hand drop. Harleena broke the silence. "That's it?" Her voice was sharp, more from nerves than doubt. Jack wiped his hands on his trousers, as though he could scrub away the weight of what they'd just done. "I bloody well hope so." The three of them stood among the empty chains and clawed wood, the lantern throwing restless shadows on walls suddenly bare. The heist wasn't over, but the crates—their prize—were gone into the dark hands of the Unseen. And for better or worse, that meant they were in debt.

The moment the shadows vanished and silence fell over the cargo hold, the three of them stood there as if the whole world had tilted. The crates were gone—spirited away into whatever nowhere the Unseen called home—and for a heartbeat, all that was left was the creak of the slowing train and the stench of sweat and steel. Jack broke the hush first, voice clipped, businesslike, but with the rough edge of relief still clinging to it. "Let's go. Tobias won't wait forever, and the longer we stand here catching our breath, the closer we are to someone else catching us. Move." They wasted no time. Harleena swung the lantern up and led the way, boots ringing hard against the floorboards as they pushed through the railcars. Harry limped behind, one hand on the wall to steady himself, blood still running sticky down his cheek, but his eyes were lit with a fevered spark. Jack stayed tight on their heels, cutter still in hand, not ready to trust silence for long. When they shoved open the door to the VIP compartment, they were met with a scene that looked like the aftermath of a card game played by wolves. Velvet curtains torn half-down. Bottles knocked across the carpet, pooling rich brandy like spilled jewels. And sitting at the center of it all—Tobias Ford, leaning back in a plush seat, jacket ruffled but grin intact.

"Hi guys," he said like they'd just strolled into a dinner party, not a crime scene. His teeth gleamed white, his eyes dancing. "Bit messy in here, but it's fine now. Two Imperial police officers subdued. And six of these pompous bastards ripe for the taking. One of the officers fired; I discouraged him. Rich folk freeze better when the air shakes." He gestured lazily at the passengers around him—wealthy men and women gagged with silk kerchiefs, hands bound with what looked like torn strips of lace and gold-thread curtain cord. Their jeweled fingers still sparkled in the lamplight, every gem begging to be pried loose. Before Jack could get a word out, Tobias added, "By the way—Harleena, your dog is the bestest of boys." From beneath one of the overturned couches padded the beast in question—her hound, muzzle dark and wet, eyes bright with feral devotion. He trotted straight to her side, tail wagging like he'd just finished a run at the park. "Oh, aren't you just the bravest boy in the world?" Harleena bent down, hands cupping his head, planting a kiss right between the blood-slick ears. She deliberately didn't look

too close at the red stains drying on his fur. Instead she grinned, sharp and proud, scratching under his chin. “He is such a good boy. Aren’t you, boy?”

The hound gave a low, satisfied chuff, like he agreed completely. Jack let out a bark of a laugh despite himself. “Gods above. We’re running a circus, not a crew.” “Circus pays better,” Tobias shot back, already moving to relieve a terrified noble of his pocket watch. “And the crowd always loves a dog act.” That broke the last of the tension. With efficiency honed by too many robberies to count, the crew descended on the wealthy passengers. Jack stripped rings and watches, moving fast, his hands deft but not cruel—he took what was worth taking and left the rest. Harleena found herself a purse fat with silver crowns and let it dangle from her belt like a prize. Harry, despite his injury, leaned close to a trembling merchant and whispered, “You’ll remember this night, won’t you? We came by, took your trinkets, and left you with a story richer than your wallet ever was.” Then he winked, and the merchant nearly fainted. In minutes, they had what they wanted. Velvet bags heavy with coin, pockets stuffed with gems and fine watches, necklaces ripped free in tangled chains. Tobias gave the signal, a tilt of the chin toward the door. Time to vanish.

They moved quick, darting out into the cool night air, the woods looming dark and ready to swallow them whole. Horses were waiting where they’d left them, and the moment they were saddled, the train and its passengers were nothing but a shadow receding into the distance. The pounding of hooves filled the night, their breath steaming in the chill, laughter spilling out between gulps of air as the high of the heist finally caught them. Harry was the first to break the silence, leaning forward in his saddle, voice carrying over the wind. “I just hope nobody figures out it was us. I like spending money, but not hanging for it, you know?” Jack snorted. “Subtlety isn’t usually your style, Harry.”

But Harleena only smiled—mischievous, sly, like she’d been waiting for the question. “Don’t worry about that.” She reached into her coat, pulling out a torn scrap of fabric. Even in the moonlight, the sigil was clear: the Ember Circle, stitched in gold thread into a fireproof vest. She let it flutter like a flag for a moment before tucking it back. “I left another one like this behind in the cargo car. Anyone looking to blame someone will think Emberlash and his little fire-breathers pulled this job. And trust me, the noble tongues in this city will be quick to bite at that story.” Jack nearly lost his reins from laughing. “You clever bloody witch.” Harry blinked at her, eyebrows climbing. “Wait—where in all the city’s rotten gutters did you get a Circle vest?”

“Oh, this old thing?” Harleena patted her coat like she’d just shown off a pretty ribbon. “Picked it up at the Gaddwick Station job. Remember that mess with the prototype? One of those flame-crazed lunatics got sloppy. I’ve been saving it for a rainy day.” Jack let out a whoop, the sound carrying into the trees. “And today it pours!” Harry shook his head, grinning despite the blood drying on his skin. “That’ll teach them to cross us. Busy themselves clearing their names while we spend their coin.”

“Exactly,” Harleena purred. “We get rich. They get trouble. The Crows get both.” The laughter bubbled up again, raw and genuine, even as the night pressed close. The heist still thrummed in their blood—the rush of the chase, the thrill of danger, the eerie chill of the Shadewraith Clan. Their bags were heavy, their names still clean, and their enemies would be chasing the wrong scent by dawn. The woods swallowed their hoofbeats as they rode, shadows twisting, moonlight scattering silver across their path. Triumph clung to them like smoke, every breath a reminder of the risk and the reward. And for a while—just a while—they were kings of the night.

The next night, following Comber’s whisper and a chalked eye on a dead oak, the cave swallowed them whole.. The Deadland Woods were a coffin of twisted trees, black bark gnarled as if frozen mid-scream, but here—inside this carved hollow of stone—the world went quiet. Cool air rolled out of the cavern mouth, carrying the mineral tang of damp earth and the faint

metallic stink of whatever the train had hidden in its belly. Their lantern cut a weak circle through the dark, its glow glancing off stacked crates branded with unfamiliar sigils and faction stamps. Jack was the first to speak, his voice carrying the smug lift of a man whose gamble had paid off. “Well,” he said, rubbing his hands together as if warming them on the thought of coin, “Comber wasn’t lying. Our fortune’s tucked away neat as a miser’s purse.”

Harry crouched by the nearest stack, tracing the painted marks with his fingertips. “These,” he murmured, excitement sharpening his voice, “belong to the Circle. And these… Cyphers.” His eyes darted to another box, chains still rattling where the Unseen had cut them clean. “Even the Gloam Sisters’ seal.” He sounded almost reverent, as though each crate were a page in a book he’d only just realized he could read. Harleena kicked at a box stamped with a sigil of flame, her face screwed in disdain. “Emberlash’s,” she spat. “Wouldn’t mind setting fire to his stash just for the pleasure of it.”

“Careful,” Jack warned, though his grin flashed in the low light. He set a hand to another lid, pried it open with a grunt, and laughed. “Powder. Fireproof fabric. The Circle’s pet arsonist was stocking up for a party. No wonder Comber wanted us to clear the tracks.” They sifted through their winnings: clothes and canned goods, crates of dull rations, and then—an oddity. A box not like the others. Brass-cornered, its seams riveted with delicate precision, the wood dark as charred bone. Harry brushed off the dust and frowned at the intricate mechanics crawling across its face. “I don’t even…” His voice trailed, wonder tugging at it. “I don’t even know what this is.”

Jack bent down to peer, lips pressed tight. “Something better left for the Cyphers to play with.” He shut the lid, snapping the brass latches closed with a finality that brooked no argument. They moved on. Some crates carried addresses plain as daylight: to the Imperial Police, Captain Ishtar himself. Harleena cracked one open and scoffed at the trinkets. Jack reached in and lifted a vial to the lantern light, liquid swirling silver-white inside. His eyes sharpened. “Truth-tincture,” he said with the certainty of someone who’d spent too long around liars. “Truth potion. Dangerous, but useful. We’ll keep a few—sell the rest.”

“Useful, aye,” Harleena said slowly, watching the vial tilt in his hand, “but also dangerous to store. You want us to be the ones carrying poison honesty in our pockets? That feels like a bad joke waiting to happen.” Jack waved her off, already tucking the vial into his satchel. “We’ll be careful.” It was Harry who found the hidden compartment, prying up a false floor with the corner of his blade. His gasp brought the others running. Five vials glimmered like bottled moonlight, each stoppered with silver caps etched in delicate script. Inside: liquid black as ink, shot through with faint smoke. “Veil,” Jack breathed, awe plain in his voice. “Exposed to air, it bursts into smoke thick enough to blind anyone—except the one who carries it. Gods, this is priceless.” Harry cradled one like it might slip away. “Perfect for sneaking missions. Imagine—slip past guards, vanish from sight. We could be ghosts!” His grin was boyish, bloodied though his face still was. But Jack’s lips pressed thin. “Or we could sell the whole lot and buy half the city.” Harleena shot him a look, already shaking her head. “Sell it? Are you cracked? This—this is leverage. This is the kind of edge that makes a small crew untouchable.”

“You think small,” he fired back, hands gripping the vial like it might turn to gold in his palm. “Always have. You see a knife and think it’s for cutting rope. I see it and think it could buy us a house.” Her jaw set. “We’re not merchants. We’re thieves. We don’t sell away the very thing that makes us better than the bastards we steal from.”

“Better?” His laugh was harsh, echoing in the stone hollow. “Don’t make me laugh. We’re already knee-deep in lies, Harleena. Every job’s a gamble with death. And you’d rather hold onto some vials like a magpie with a shiny trinket than turn them into something useful—coin, safety, freedom.” Her anger came low, grinding. “Safety doesn’t come from coin. It comes from being too dangerous to cross. From keeping the tools that make us ghosts in the dark.”

“And I say it comes from having enough coin to vanish when trouble comes knocking,” he shot back, stepping closer, eyes bright with hunger, voice thick with greed. The lantern trembled in Harry’s hand as he glanced between them, shoulders tense, face paling under the smear of dried blood. He knew this tone—the one that meant neither would back down, the one that burned hotter than any fire in Doskvol. He opened his mouth, maybe to speak, maybe to shout, maybe to crack a joke and cut the tension—but the words never left. Because his curiosity had already betrayed him.

While they argued, he had wandered to the back of the cave, hands restless, drawn to the last stack of crates marked for the Cyphers. Metals, bars of it stacked neat, glinting dully like half-finished ideas. He pried open another, frowning at its strange weight. And inside—spheres. Perfect golden orbs, no bigger than a clenched fist, their surfaces polished so clean they reflected the lantern light in sharp, distorted gleams. Something in Harry itched. A hunger to know, to touch. He reached in and plucked one free. The sphere twitched. His breath caught. Then, like a nightmare sprouting legs, the thing unfolded—six spindly brass limbs snapping out in a jerking dance. The orb grew tall, spider-legged, claws scraping across the wood. It scrambled from his palm with a skitter that set every hair on his body upright.

“Saints,” Harry whispered, voice hollow. His eyes followed it as it climbed the stone wall, every movement crisp, mechanical, deliberate. It stopped halfway up and froze. For an instant, silence rang again. Then—red. A flare of light blinked alive in its core, pulsing, throbbing like a heartbeat. A beep followed, sharp and rhythmic, echoing through the cave like a countdown. Harry’s stomach plummeted. His mouth opened but no sound came at first. Fear rooted him, pure and cold, even as sweat chilled across his spine. Behind him, Jack and Harleena stopped mid-argument. Their voices cut like knives, then silence slammed in. Both turned, eyes narrowing, watching Harry’s stiff frame, the trembling glow of crimson light painting the walls.

The sound grew louder, steadier.

Beep.
Beep.
Beep.

Every pulse brighter than the last. And all three of them realized at the same time: this wasn’t cargo. It was a bomb.

Harleena’s voice split the air. “It’s a fucking bomb!” she screamed, her tone shrill, shaking with raw terror. Her chest heaved, eyes wide and feral, fixed on the thing clinging to the stone. “What did you do, Harry? *What did you do?*” Her voice cracked, rising into hysteria. Jack cursed under his breath, his jaw set hard, sweat rolling down his temple. He glanced at the crates stacked around them—powder kegs, bundles of fabrics, more boxes full of who-knew-what volatile garbage—and his voice came rough, urgent. “We’re in a cave, Harleena. A cave *full of gunpowder.* Another crate full of those damned spiders. If this goes off—there won’t be a bone left of us. Not one.”

Harry’s hands shook uncontrollably. His breath came shallow, fast, ragged, but something in him broke free of the terror. He lunged for a strip of cloth, ripped it from his coat with shaking fingers, and staggered toward the wall. Every second stretched thin, the beeping a hammer on his skull. His fingertips brushed the metal orb—hot, vibrating, alive. He hissed through his teeth and pulled it free, wrapping it in the trembling folds of fabric, knotting it into a makeshift sack. The light strobed faster, harsher. The beeping built, relentless.

“Saints above, we don’t have time,” Jack growled, stepping back, scanning the dark like escape might just peel open if he glared hard enough. Harleena didn’t hesitate. She ripped the bag from Harry’s trembling hands, clutching it tight. Her dog padded close, ears flat, sensing the storm.

She dropped low, pressing the bundle into his snout, whispering frantically through tears. “Please, my boy… don’t die. Don’t you dare. Come back to me.” She kissed his head, voice breaking. “Please.”

The animal didn’t falter. With a sudden bound, he tore off into the trees, the ticking bundle clutched in his jaws. The silence left behind was worse. Each beep echoing faintly in the distance gnawed at their nerves. Every sound felt like the last before death. And then the night ripped apart.

The forest roared with fire. A blast cracked the ground, rattling the stone under their feet, searing the treetops with a plume of smoke and flame. The echo rolled through the woods, hollow and violent, while dust shook loose from the cave ceiling and rained down on them like ashes. They stood frozen, blood iced, breaths trapped in their throats. Seconds crawled by. A minute stretched into an eternity. Then—paws, padding. Panting. The sound of claws on stone.

The dog stumbled back into the cave, his fur singed at the tips, his mouth drooling soot, but alive. Alive. Harleena collapsed to her knees, sobbing in relief, clutching him so tightly he whimpered. “You stupid, stupid boy,” she wept, burying her face in his neck. “You’re all I have, and you almost died for *them*.”

Her sobs twisted, cracked, transformed into a scream of rage. She turned, hair clinging to her tear-streaked face, eyes blazing fire. She pointed a shaking hand at Jack and Harry, her whole body trembling with fury. “You nearly killed him!” Her voice echoed off the stone, hysterical, wild. “You nearly killed my boy! You dragged me into bombs and shadows and death, and *he*—” her voice broke again, throat raw, “—*he* had to pay the price!” Jack lifted his hands in surrender, words caught in his throat, but she wasn’t listening. Her fury came in waves, crashing harder and harder. “You’re poison! You’ll bleed us all dry, you’ll bury me alive, and you’ll bury *him* if I let you! You’d—” “Enough,” Jack said, voice low, sharp, but trembling at the edges. “*Don’t you tell me enough!*” she howled, stepping forward, her fury consuming her. She was shaking, fists clenched, eyes red and wet with grief. “Everyone I’ve ever trusted, every bastard I’ve stood beside—you’re all the same! You smile, you lie, you pull me close, and then you dig my grave. I swear, I’ll put you in the dirt first before I let you take him!”

She was breaking—splintering open before his eyes, more wound than woman now. Jack’s chest clenched. He knew the words wouldn’t reach her. Nothing would. So he acted. His hand moved fast, faster than thought, pulling the pouch of trance powder from his belt. In one desperate, regretful sweep, he flung it into her face. Her scream choked into coughs, her body swayed, her knees buckled. She clawed at the air, blinking through tears as the powder seeped into her lungs. Her rage faltered, her fury softened into a weak gasp, and then she sagged, limp, into Jack’s arms. He caught her, trembling, his chest heaving. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, the words breaking as they left him. His jaw locked, eyes wet, guilt stabbing deep. He cradled her carefully, like she was glass, his breath shuddering as if every exhale might shatter him too. Harry’s voice broke the silence, small, shaking, barely human. “She’ll never forgive you,” he whispered. His face was pale, his eyes wet, fixed on Harleena’s unconscious form. “She’ll see this as betrayal. She’ll hate you for it. Are you sure… are you sure you were right?”

Jack closed his eyes for a long moment, the weight of her body pressing against him, heavier than stone. His voice came low, raw, and hollow. “I’m never sure I’m right about anything in life, my boy. Learn that.” He swallowed hard, regret searing his throat. “We’ll deal with her anger when it comes. For now… we survive.” He shifted her carefully onto his shoulder, carried her with slow, deliberate steps, each one a punishment. Then he turned, his face carved with regret, his words thin as air. “Let’s go home. We’ll sell what we can, keep what we should. The Cyphers can wait. Rabbit’s Foot needs to hear all of this.” And with that, they left the cave. Their loot weighed heavy, but nothing compared to the silence between them, heavier than stone, sharper

than grief. The night carried them away, but no distance could dull the truth: some wounds were carved too deep to heal.

News: Terror at the Door of Doskvol: Train Hijacked in Broad Daylight

In the bustling canteen of the Imperial Guard headquarters, two guards, Tiberius "Tib" Voss and Aric "Rik" Malone, took a rare moment of respite from their duties. They sat at a small table in the corner, a single lamp casting a dim glow over their lunch trays. Between bites of their meals, the two guards pored over the latest newspaper edition, their conversation focused on a particularly alarming piece of news.

Tib Voss: (gesturing to the newspaper) “Rik, have you seen this? It’s madness. ‘In a shocking display of brazen criminality, the latest incoming train scheduled to arrive at Gaddwick Station from the northern outpost was hijacked and robbed in a bold and audacious attack.’”

Rik Malone: (frowning as he reads) “Yeah, I’m looking at it. It says the train was hit just before it reached Doskvol. ‘The situation quickly turned violent, with one security guard sustaining severe injuries, losing a hand in the event.’ Damn, that’s brutal.”

Tib Voss: (shaking his head) “I’ve heard the reports. They’re saying there were between three to thirty assailants. Seems like nobody’s sure of the numbers. And get this—‘Passengers witnessed shapes riding horses just outside the train before it was hijacked.’ I thought the Deadlands Woods were supposed to be secure enough to keep most sane folk out.”

Rik Malone: (nodding) “Yeah, but apparently, the Imperial Police were overwhelmed. Took them eight hours to get the train moving again. That’s an embarrassment. Makes you wonder how prepared we really are.”

Tib Voss: “Exactly. And here’s the kicker: they found a fireproof vest at the scene. They’re linking it to the Ember Circle. But it’s just speculation at this point. No solid evidence yet.”

Rik Malone: (sighing) “That’s the problem. It’s like we’re constantly chasing shadows. And speaking of shadows, do you remember that deal Captain Ishtar had with that guy they call Emberlash?”

Tib Voss: (nodding) “Yeah, I remember. Real shady business. We were given orders to handle some closed boxes. ‘Strictly no opening,’ the Captain said. It felt odd, to be honest. Emberlash was just too... mysterious. Got bad vibes from that whole situation.”

Rik Malone: “Same here. I was uneasy the whole time. We’re getting more and more fire calls lately, and it’s almost like our workload’s been shifted. You think it’s related?”

Tib Voss: “Could be. There’s definitely something fishy going on. The Captain’s alliance with Emberlash—it’s looking more dubious by the day. With all these fire calls and now this train hijacking, it feels like we’re caught in the middle of a power struggle.”

Rik Malone: “Yeah, and what about the Ember Circle? If they’re involved, it’s not just about a train heist anymore. It’s a full-blown escalation. I wonder if this is a sign that the alliance between the Captain and Emberlash is falling apart.”

Tib Voss: “It might be. There’s definitely some sort of fallout happening. The Ember Circle might be trying to make a statement, or Emberlash could be making moves we don’t fully understand yet. Either way, it’s clear something’s brewing.”

Rik Malone: “And the public’s view of the whole thing? It’s all over the place. People are losing faith in the police, and it’s making our jobs harder. We’re supposed to be the shield, but it feels like we’re being left exposed.”

As they continued discussing the article, the sound of boots approaching caught their attention. Captain Ishtar entered the canteen, his authoritative presence immediately silencing the room. Tib and Rik exchanged nervous glances, their conversation abruptly halting as the Captain walked by. Ishtar’s gaze swept the room, landing briefly on their table.

Captain Ishtar: (looking at the two men with a steely gaze) “How’s the break, gentlemen?”

Tib Voss: (quickly hiding the newspaper) “Just taking a break, Captain.”

Captain Ishtar: “Good. Keep your focus. We have enough to deal with without any distractions.”

As he moved past them, Tib and Rik fell silent. The tension in the canteen was palpable, their earlier conversation replaced by a cautious quiet. They exchanged glances, the weight of the Captain’s presence making their previous discussion seem more like a distant echo.

Rik Malone: (whispering) “Think we should keep an eye on things?”

Tib Voss: (nodding) “Definitely. We’ll need to stay alert. There’s more going on than we’re being told.”

With Captain Ishtar’s presence hanging over them, the two guards returned to their meals, the conversation now subdued. The day’s events loomed large in their minds, and the uncertainty of their situation left a lingering sense of unease as they prepared to return to their duties.

Story: Shadows of the Underworld

In the southern reaches of the Crow's Ward region, a seemingly ordinary house stood as a front for a more clandestine operation. From the outside, it looked like any other residence in the bustling city of Doskvol, but beneath its unremarkable surface lay a burgeoning underground hospital. This hidden facility catered to those who either couldn't afford the exorbitant fees of the main hospitals or, more often, couldn't risk their identities being exposed. The hospital was overseen by the Crows but operated by two skilled but harried medical professionals: Dr. Lazarus Finch and his assistant, Dr. Mitch Rich.

One ordinary day, as the members of the Crows went about their business, Dr. Lazarus Finch descended into the dimly lit corridors of the underground hospital. His routine involved preparing for the influx of patients, making sure that the grimy walls and sterile equipment were in working order. However, what greeted him that morning was far from ordinary.

As Lazarus entered the main room, his heart skipped a beat. There, in the centre of the room, lay a body bag on the medical bed. It was an unusual sight, especially since there had been no prior notification of a new patient. The bag was stark against the sterile white sheets of the table, and its unexpected presence sent a shiver down his spine. With a rising sense of dread, Lazarus screamed for his assistant.

Dr. Mitch Rich rushed in, half-shaved with soap still dripping down his face. "What's going on?" Mitch asked, bewildered. The two doctors stared at the body bag, and a shadowy figure standing beside the table. It was a creature made entirely of darkness, a living embodiment of shadows. It regarded the two men with hollow eyes before glancing at the body bag and then vanishing into thin air, leaving an eerie silence in its wake.

"What in the blazes was that?" Mitch gasped.

"Bloody hell, I don't get paid enough for this," Lazarus muttered, his voice shaking as he tried to compose himself. "Let's see what's inside this bag."

The two doctors, their nerves frayed, opened the body bag to reveal Marcio Keel, a man they'd never met before. The sight of his lifeless form did nothing to calm their growing unease. "I guess this is the guy that we were expecting." Lazarus muttered. "Rabbit never mentioned a fucking shadow demon, did he?" Mitch asked, with no response from Lazarus.

A couple of days later, Lazarus called Mitch back to the hospital for a more pressing matter. Mitch, now fully dressed and looking slightly more composed, arrived to find Lazarus in the midst of a tense investigation.

"I need to show you something," Lazarus said, his voice low and urgent. "Remember the body we found? The guy named Marcio? Look at this."

Lazarus pulled out a glass box from a cupboard. Inside, a piece of human flesh floated in a scummy black liquid. Mitch peered into the box with a mix of curiosity and dread.

"What am I looking at, Lazarus?" Mitch asked.

"This," Lazarus replied, pointing at the glass box, "is a piece of Marcio's gut that I took out. But look at the liquid."

Mitch's eyes widened. "What is that liquid?"

"That's what's strange," Lazarus continued. "The flesh had no liquid inside it when I extracted it. It's almost like this piece of meat is dissolving itself."

Lazarus tapped the glass with one gloved finger, his voice low and grim.

“This isn’t ghostwork, Mitch. No spirit leaves a mark like this. And it’s not sorcery either—I’ve seen enough curses to know their stink. This… this was made. By human hands. By science.”

Mitch’s face grew pale as the implications of the situation sank in. “Do you think that what killed him... the thing that is so contagious... was not a virus?”

“Most likely not,” Lazarus said grimly. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

They locked eyes, a dawning horror spreading between them. “Flesh-eating bacteria,” they exclaimed in unison, their voices echoing in the sterile confines of the hospital. The realisation was chilling. If Marcio had been infected with such a pathogen, it meant that there was a highly dangerous and potentially epidemic-level threat lurking in the shadows of Doskvol. The implications for both their hospital and the city at large were dire. As they contemplated the gravity of their discovery, the hospital’s usual hum of activity felt more menacing than ever. The shadowy figure’s brief appearance, the unsettling liquid, and now the possibility of a flesh-eating disease—all these elements coalesced into a nightmarish puzzle that Lazarus and Mitch were now a part of. The safety of their makeshift hospital and, indeed, the city itself was at stake, and the Crows' operations would soon find themselves intertwined with this new, horrifying threat. They stood in silence, the glass box between them, the faint hiss of dissolving flesh filling the room. At last Lazarus exhaled, barely more than a whisper. “If this spreads… Doskvol won’t stand a chance.”

Chapter 9: The Black Marrow Infiltration

The house met them with the kind of quiet that isn't peace—only exhaustion holding still. Jack and Harry shouldered through the front, Harleena slack in Jack's arms, her dog welded to his heel. Sawdust and lime clung to the air; somewhere a pane settled in its putty with a soft tick. Mick's men had quit at dusk, but the day's work still spoke—fresh timber scent, a new hinge that didn't squeal, a board that answered with a young sound when you stepped on it. They laid her on the narrow bed in the back room, the one with the patched window and the view of the yard where nothing grew yet. The dog put his head on the mattress and refused to blink. Harry stood useless at the footboard, hands hovering, jaw set to keep his teeth from chattering though he wasn't cold. Jack stayed. He didn't know what else to do except occupy the guilt so it didn't take the whole room. His knuckles were still dusted white from rope and coal; he scrubbed them against his coat like that might change whose breath had slowed under his hands an hour ago. The trance powder sachet he'd emptied at her face felt like a stone in the pocket it no longer occupied.

"We can't leave her like this," Harry said finally, voice scraped flat. It came out like a confession.

"We won't," Jack answered. He sat on the edge of the chair without taking his eyes off her. "She wakes, I take what she throws."

It didn't take long. Harleena's breath changed first—caught, hitched, found anger to breathe on. Her eyelids struggled, then opened with that unfocused, swimmy look that always comes after someone drags you up from too-deep water. The moment her gaze found the ceiling and decided which way was up, memory arrived like a blade. She flinched from the light, from the smell of Jack, from the dog's worried breath, from the wordless fact of the room.

"What did you do to me," she said, and the steadiness of it cut more than any shout. She pushed up on an elbow; the dog whined, then stilled at the snap of her fingers. "You powdered me. Like a mark. Like some street drunk you didn't want making noise." Jack didn't stand, didn't raise his hands, didn't try to shrink either. "I did," he said. The words were stones, and he set each one down where she could see it. "I did, and I am sorry. You were going to tear yourself open with what you felt. I chose the thing that left you breathing." Her mouth trembled and then found steel. "You chose for me."

"Yes." He didn't blink away from it. "And I'll wear what it costs." The dog pressed his weight into the bed frame until it creaked. Harry looked everywhere but at her—at the new plaster stripe along the ceiling, at the coil of rope in the corner, at the hat he wasn't wearing. "He's right that you were… gone," Harry offered, soft, and hated how small it sounded. Harleena's eyes slid to Harry, not to hurt him, only because pain had to move. "You two nearly put my dog in the ground," she said. "If you want forgiveness, dig me the hole you meant for me and lie in it first." Jack swallowed. "I'm not asking forgiveness. I'm asking for the chance to keep this roof over our heads for another week. And to pay Lazarus what we promised so he keeps stitching us shut when the world opens us." She let the name turn on her tongue, testing whether it still fit in her mouth without blood. "Lazarus."

"He's got the hospital breathing again," Harry said, grateful for a fact that didn't cut. "Basement's running full tilt since the Circle set half the district on fire. He and—"

"Mitch Rich," Jack supplied, grateful for the same. "Doctor's friend. Odd but good with a blade and a bottle. He stayed. Might keep him full time if the coin's decent and the ghosts don't make him quit." Harleena stared at the cracked paint over the window where a moth battered itself to

quiet. Anger was a furnace that needed stoking; the room had given it less to burn than she wanted. “And where do we get coin for decent wages,” she asked, flat, already knowing the answer and hating it. “The train bought us a backbone,” Jack said, and the guilt braided into his voice as if it belonged there. “Enough to hide the hospital better than a curtain and a prayer. False walls. New locks. A proper blind entrance that doesn’t advertise itself to the Imperial Police every time someone coughs. But we’ve got something to do before we spend it.”

“Of course we do,” she said, and turned her face away so they couldn’t see the wetness she hated them for causing. “There’s always something to do before I get the thing I asked for.” Silence took a chair between them and folded its hands. Rabbit’s Foot leaned in the doorway like he’d been there for a minute and decided to be seen now. He’d walked back in with the city on his coat—coal-fume, old rain, the bitter cinnamon of a memory he couldn’t shake. His eyes took them in the way a man checks a room for exits before he looks for friends. “Screaming or speaking?” he asked, and when no one corrected him, added, “Speaking then. Good.” Harleena didn’t look at him. “You left,” she said to Jack, but Rabbit answered, because sometimes the quickest way to lower a blade was to put it in your own ribs. “I did,” Rabbit said. “And I came back. With pieces we’re going to need. Merrow’s name is getting heavier in the streets. The laugh mark showed near Crimson. There’s talk of shipments that don’t stay in ledgers and of a meeting nobody can get a time for, only a direction.” Harry glanced up. “Direction to what?”

“Ladher,” Rabbit said, and the word put a taste of iron in the room. “Not rumor like last month. Something more organized. People are spending fear like money. When they spend it like that, they expect to get change.” Harleena closed her eyes. Her shoulders rose and fell once with the weight of always being asked to carry one more thing. “And if we go chasing ghosts in suits, who puts stitches in the real people bleeding downstairs?”

“Lazarus does,” Rabbit said gently. “And Mitch Rich. And Jim Bob runs the door like it owes him rent. You’re not the only hand in the city that keeps people together.” At the name, the line at the corner of Harleena’s mouth softened despite itself. “Jim Bob will teach the dog to play cards if I leave them alone too long.”

“Then think how much richer we’ll be when we get back,” Harry tried, and the attempt at lightness made Harleena’s mouth twitch—not a smile, but its ghost. Jack dragged a palm down his face, as if he could press himself into a man who had not thrown powder at a friend. “I know I don’t get to ask. But I am asking. We need to hear what the city is saying in rooms that aren’t ours. Then we come back and make this place a cathedral of hiding.”

“Cathedral,” she repeated, and the dryness in it could have preserved meat. “Fine word for a basement.”

“It’s what we have,” Jack said. The dog exhaled in a gust that smelled of ash and wool and the old iron of the forge he’d been born in. It sounded like a verdict. They might have kept circling the same piece of pain until dawn, each waiting for the other to give something nobody could afford, if the light in the doorway hadn’t bent wrong. At first it was only a pressure—a small change in the air that made the hair at Harry’s nape climb his scalp. Then the shadow along the hall unhooked itself from the wall and walked. It came quiet, translucent at the edges like heat over iron, a man-shaped absence moving with the patience of something that didn’t need feet. Pale points where eyes should be made the room colder without touching it. Harry went still, throat working. The dog rose but did not bark. Jack didn’t reach for a knife; a man didn’t draw on weather. Rabbit’s hands opened slow, palms empty in a language older than words. The Shadewraith Clan stopped by the bed, tilt of head acknowledging Harleena first, as if it knew who owned the room. It raised one hand and the night in its fingers condensed into a neat, folded square of paper. The thing set the paper on the blanket by her knee with a courtesy that was almost obscene and then unmade itself—thinned, thinned, was gone without crossing the

space you could measure. No one spoke until the sound of it not being there finished leaving the house. Jack picked up the paper without looking at the others, because doing was easier than being looked at. The fold cracked softly. Inside: a charcoal-drawn map, the lines so fine they might have been hair; an hour written twice, as if it could be argued with; a name printed in a hand that didn't guess; a small daguerreotype plate fixed at the corner with black wax. The name read: Shadow's Den. The hour: tonight. The face was a man's in hard light—high collar, unreadable gaze that seemed to look past whoever held him. Below it, in tight script: Nicolas Nightwood. The room's temperature found a new low. Harry leaned in despite himself. "That's… him?"

Rabbit didn't touch the plate. "That's our next breath," he said. "Or the last one, depending." Jack's jaw worked. The guilt in him and the need to move had become the same animal. "We go," he said. "Harry, with me. Rabbit, with us. We get there on time or we don't bother calling ourselves clever." All eyes slid to Harleena. She held Jack's stare and let him see whatever wasn't broken yet. "No," she said. Not loud. Hard. "I don't follow you into another room where I come out smelling like powder, not tonight. I'm getting stitched, and then I'm speaking to Jim Bob about the door and the rota, and I'm making Lazarus eat something that isn't coffee. Mitch Rich can't live on nerves forever. The hospital is breathing because I told it to—if I leave, it might decide to stop." Jack flinched at the very small word no more than he had at the larger ones. He nodded, once, accepting a sentence he had written for himself. "Alright." He took a breath, failed to lift the weight, tried again. "The money from the train covers walls and locks. Tomorrow I'll buy the ones that sing quiet and the paint that confuses the eye. But tonight we go to this Nightwood and find out what the city thinks it's going to do to itself."

Harry's eyes flicked between them like he could keep both of them if he moved fast enough. "We'll be back before you can finish yelling at us," he said to Harleena, and then regretted the shape of the joke as soon as it left. "Don't make me hope," she said. She put her fingers into the dog's ruff and didn't look away from Jack. "Bring me something worth the trouble." Rabbit reached for the note and slid it into his coat. "We'll bring you the shape of the knife before it finds our backs," he said. "And if Nightwood's as careful as his picture, we might come back with more than rumor." Jack stood. The chair scraped. He adjusted the coat he'd slept in and failed to sleep in, the one that had learned more confessions than any priest. He looked at Harleena and let the apology stand without reaching for it again; he looked at Harry and tried to lend him steadiness he did not perfectly own; he looked at Rabbit and found, blessedly, a mirror that did not hate him. "Then we move," he said. The house hummed—a nail settling, a board remembering. Outside, the street had already begun its night music: cart wheels, a woman's laugh cut short, the faint, always-there throb of the city's bad heart. Harry lifted the lamp. The flame tilted, recovered. The dog huffed once and lay back down like a sentry who welcomed exactly no one. Harleena lay her head back on the thin pillow and stared at the ceiling as if it might tell her which of these men would be alive in the morning. They went out through the hall where the plaster still kept the fire's fingerprints. In the doorway, Jack paused and looked back—not for permission, not for forgiveness. For the count. Four souls, one room, a house that might yet hold. The folded paper crackled in Rabbit's pocket like a match waiting on a strike.

Shadow's Den. Tonight. Nicolas Nightwood.

The job had already chosen them. They only had to decide how much of themselves they would spend getting there.

The Shadow's Den kept its own weather. North of Hexspire, the street bled into a pocket of hush where the lamps were dimmer than they should have been and the cobbles remembered softer shoes. A narrow door with a brass knocker shaped like a finger to the lips admitted them into velvet and murmur—the kind of room that swallowed a man whole and gave him back only the parts that knew how to keep a secret.

Heavy curtains pinned the night to the windows. Candles guttered in deep sconces, throwing long, useful shadows across tapestries whose knotwork hinted at things better left in the knots. Glass clicked without ringing. Laughter came muffled, as if it wore gloves. Behind the bar stood Ezra Nightshade—called the Whisper by people who liked waking up—broad-shouldered in a black waistcoat, sleeves rolled, eyes like polished slate. He polished a glass that didn't need it and counted the room the way a gambler counts exits. When Jack, Rabbit, and Harry slipped in, he gave the smallest nod, the kind that meant: I saw you arrive, I'll see you leave, and in between you belong to the dark. They took a corner table with two walls at their backs and the room in front. Nobody said much. The dog wasn't with them; the absence felt like a missing tooth you couldn't stop tonguing. Harry fiddled with a brass button until it clicked free and went into his pocket. Jack watched the door the way some men watch a sermon. Rabbit let his gaze slide over the clientele—dock foremen with careful hats, women in cheap silk with expensive knives, two scholars pretending they weren't—until it found the bar mirror and returned to him with a face he recognized.

The man who stepped out of the mirror's reflection and into the room could have been anyone if you only looked once. Coat cut clean. Collar pin with no crest. Shoes that didn't squeak. But look twice and you saw a habit of standing where sightlines crossed, a patience in the eyes that wasn't boredom so much as economy. Nicolas Nightwood. Rabbit rose half out of his chair, a courtesy and a test. "Drink?"

"Water," Nicolas said, soft, like someone who kept his flame low by choice. The Whisper set a heavy-bottomed glass down without being asked and drifted away, back to the business of pretending he wasn't listening. Nicolas reached into his coat and produced a folded square of fine rag paper, sealed with black wax impressed by a single, unblinking eye. He set it on the table with two fingers, then lifted his brows at them. Jack slid their own folded square free of an inner pocket—Comber's courier had put it in his hand like a cold coin—and pushed it across. The black wax on theirs was stamped with the suggestion of a door half-open. Nicolas cracked both seals, read both notes by touch as much as sight—the habit of a man who expected his rooms to go dark—and the set of his shoulders eased a degree. "Good," he said. "We're speaking to the right shadows." He didn't waste the room's patience. "There's a meeting aboard the Black Marrow Lounge," he said. "You know the name. You'll go aboard, get close enough to hear what you need, and come back with the shape of it." Harry's mouth already knew the question his head hadn't framed. "Black Marrow Lounge—Pennwright's boat?" Jack's eyes narrowed. "Oskar's territory," he said, deliberately using the man's proper name as if that might save a tooth. "Heavily watched. Heavily armed. Heavily insulted if you step wrong." Nicolas inclined. "All true. Floating casino, private salons, foreign writers of law on the guest list. Crew who don't ask questions because they've already learned they don't need to. Smugglers and mercenaries by trade, but the ones who last are the ones who can be quiet. You won't win a fight with the boat. You'll have to win a conversation with the dark." Rabbit's fingers went to the edge of his glass and stayed there. "And the meeting?"

"The thing I can tell you," Nicolas said, voice lowering, "is that it matters. The thing I can't tell you is who, because knowing that makes you loud to a certain listener." He let the sentence hang. Harry frowned. "Loud to who—"

"The Umbral Eye," Rabbit said before he could stop himself. The words put a little frost on the tabletop. Nicolas's gaze acknowledged him. "Oskar Pennwright," he said, and did not use the nickname, "took it for himself. He hides it behind a patch because it scares the vain, but he doesn't need to show it to use it. If he looks at you and there's too much plan in your head, he'll read it like a ledger. And I don't get to keep playing this game." Jack's jaw set. "So we go in with pockets light."

“With minds lighter,” Nicolas corrected. “I can’t brief you the way I would my own people because my own people can’t be the ones to go. If he reads one of mine, he gets the whole web. You’re… less connected to my mistakes.”

“That’s one way to say ‘expendable,’” Jack said, not offended, just accurate. Nicolas’s mouth tilted a fraction. “I prefer ‘independent.’ You improvise. You survive. You aren’t wrapped in my threads.” Rabbit leaned forward, elbows on wood, voice even. “You’re asking us to walk into a room where a man can turn our thoughts into evidence. You’re telling us not to carry anything he can look at twice. And you’re telling us to come back with the shape of a conversation important enough to float a casino around it.”

“Yes,” Nicolas said simply. “I am.”

“What are we listening for?” Harry asked. “Even a compass point helps.”

“Two words I think you already know,” Nicolas said. “Money. War.” He held their eyes as the syllables changed the air. “I can’t give you more without putting it in your heads where his Eye can find it. You’ll know it when you hear it because the room will change temperature.” Jack rubbed a thumb along a groove in the table. “Alright. You want ears. How close?”

“Close enough to hear contingency, not just posture. The Lounge has a habit of making its private rooms feel like they float inside the ship, not part of it. Carpets swallow footfall. Vent grates carry sound strangely. Find the grate that doesn’t whistle, not the one that does.”

“Access?” Rabbit asked. “Invites, tokens, uniforms?”

“Three approaches, your choice,” Nicolas said, sliding a small leather packet across. Inside were four stamped chits for the public gaming floor, a pair of forged guest cards with blank names, and a laundry mark from the ship’s service locker. “You can walk in as players if you want to be obvious and forgettable. You can walk in as invited nobodies if you want doors to open and eyes to watch you. Or you can walk in wearing a man who usually carries plates and disappear entirely. I won’t pick the method. You’ll do it better than I could tell you.” Harry lifted one chit, watched the stamped Skua catch candlelight. “If we’re caught?” Nicolas’s face didn’t change. “Don’t be.” The Whisper drifted past and set fresh water on the table, unasked. His sleeve brushed the candle and made the flame gutter. The room hushed around the little motion like a dog pricking its ears. “One more thing,” Nicolas said. He glanced once—not nervously, not theatrically—toward the door, then back. “Don’t take anything valuable aboard that you’re not prepared to lose. The Lounge has a way of… keeping what it likes.” Rabbit didn’t move, but the chain at his collar felt heavier, warmer, the Ring humming a small, private no at the base of his throat. He kept his face arranged and let the warning sink into the places it needed to. Across from him, Harry’s hand tightened on the pocket where he kept more secrets than tools. Jack saw both movements and didn’t look at either too long. “Understood,” Rabbit said, and made it sound like he meant the ship, not himself. “Good,” Nicolas said. He drew breath, let it out slow. “You’ll have watchers on you the moment your boots touch that gangway. Oskar cultivates suspicion the way some men cultivate roses. Stick to the crowd. Let other people make the noise you need. When the meeting begins, the floor will tilt—you’ll feel it without the ship moving. That’s when you dare.” Jack tapped the leather packet once with two fingers. “Payment?”

“For now,” Nicolas said, “You get the Den’s protection on your way there and a friend at the end of a rope if you fall in the water. If you come back with something worth the asking, we talk coin and favors.” He let the smallest smile show. “And if you come back with a name I can’t be without, I pay like a man who doesn’t want you to sell it twice.” Harry looked to Rabbit; Rabbit looked to Jack; Jack looked at the door as if he could see through the wood to the river’s black

line. “We’ll need one more chair,” Rabbit said, surprising none of them more than himself. “Harleena’s coming.” Jack blinked, the smallest misstep he’d allowed in hours. “Is she?”

“She will,” Rabbit said, not an order, a reading. “We don’t walk into a den without the person who knows how to leave it alive.” Nicolas accepted the adjustment without comment. “Four, then. The Whisper will have a ferry at Lantern Dock in an hour. You’ll ride out with the midnight gamblers; nobody watches a man who looks like he’s about to lose.” The Whisper’s shadow grew across their table as if to confirm it. He didn’t speak. He didn’t need to. Nicolas stood. “I’ll be a rumor when you look again,” he said. “If you need to say my name aboard that ship, you’ve already lost. Don’t say it.” Rabbit rose with him. “And if the Eye looks?”

“Think about the cards in your hand,” Nicolas said, and for the first time there was something like warmth in his voice. “Not the ones you left on the table.” He left their corner before the candle could remember to flicker. When they looked for him three breaths later, he was part of the room again—glass, shadow, the suggestion of someone exiting just as someone entered. The three of them sat a moment longer with the water they hadn’t touched. Jack folded the chits into his coat. Harry counted the beats in the candle’s gutter and tried to hear if the river sounded different when it carried a casino. “Harleena,” Rabbit said at last, and they were moving, chairs pushed back, the Den absorbing their departure without ripple. Outside, the city’s damp breath kissed their faces; the moon made a suggestion of silver on the canal. “We fetch her,” Jack said. “We dress plain. We carry light.”

“And we don’t think about anything we can’t afford to lose,” Harry said, more to himself than the others. Rabbit’s hand went to the chain at his throat and stilled there, just once. “Exactly,” he said. They turned their steps toward home, toward a woman who would decide if she forgave a man with powder on his hands, toward a river that promised both passage and teeth, toward a ship where minds weren’t private and secrets were a kind of coin that spent themselves. The night, as always, didn’t care. As they stepped back into the damp night, the clamor of the Den muffled behind them, Rabbit fell silent, his thoughts chewing at him like rats in the dark. After a long stretch of walking, he spoke, voice low. “Jack,” he said, eyes fixed on the cobblestones, “how much control do you really have over that memory trick of yours?” Jack frowned, caught off guard. “Control? I don’t… I mean, I can push, nudge, sometimes clean-slate a moment. Why?” Rabbit slowed his pace. “Because I want one memory gone. Erased.” Harry and Jack both looked at him. Jack asked carefully, “Which one?”

“The Ring,” Rabbit said. He tapped the spot beneath his collar where it hid, heavy against his chest. “I’m going to leave it at home. Write a letter to myself. Then you scrub it from me. If Pennwright reads my mind, he finds nothing.” Harry blinked, then let out a sharp breath that turned into a grin. “That’s… actually brilliant. Risky, but brilliant.” Jack hesitated, uncertainty in his eyes. “It’s not clean work, Rabbit. You’ll wake up with holes where your steps should be. A man can lose himself that way.”

“I’ll risk it,” Rabbit said, voice flat, resolute. “Better me stumbling in the dark than handing him the fire that burns the city.” The three of them walked on, the air colder now, the decision hanging between them like a drawn blade.

The decision to leave their treasures behind had not come easily. In the days leading up to departure, the air in the underground hospital hung thick with tension, every creak of the floorboards and murmur of the sick echoing the weight of what was coming. Rabbit’s Foot sat at his desk, fingers drumming against the wood as he stared at the Umbral Ring. It gleamed faintly in the candlelight, almost pulsing, as if mocking him for letting it go. His jaw clenched, and after a long pause he muttered under his breath, “You’ll still be here when I come back. You’d better

be.” He slid it into the false bottom of the drawer and closed it firmly, his hand lingering for a heartbeat too long. Harry locked his own artifact away with less sentiment but no less unease. The Umbral Rod clicked shut inside the drawer, and he stood there with his palms pressed to the wood. “Don’t go anywhere, I will be back for you.” His voice was brittle, almost defensive, as if daring anyone to question his nerves. Harleena lingered longest. She knelt on the floor of her small room, her arms wrapped tightly around her dog, face buried in its fur. The animal whimpered softly, sensing her distress, and she whispered into its ear, “I’ll be back before you know it. I promise.” She repeated the words like a prayer, as if speaking them enough could make them true. When she rose, her eyes were rimmed red, though her posture was proud, determined. She walked past Jack without a glance, her silence heavier than any curse.

When the day came, the four of them moved with the solemnity of condemned souls. Boarding the ferry felt like stepping across a threshold they could never return from. Guards searched them with mechanical precision, confiscating everything sharp, everything dangerous. Harry groaned as his hidden blade was plucked from his boot. “Bloody vultures,” he grumbled, glaring at the uniformed man. Rabbit winced as his own small knife was uncovered, muttering, “Feels like going to war barehanded.” Jack offered no complaint, though his eyes narrowed, scanning every guard’s face, memorizing their posture, their weapons, their weak points. Harleena submitted to the search without a word, her head held high, but the set of her jaw and the rigid line of her shoulders betrayed the storm beneath her calm façade.

The boat rocked gently, carrying them across gray waters. None of them spoke much; silence said more than words could. The mission loomed ahead like a specter, and each was trapped in their own thoughts—Rabbit rehearsing lies, Harry weighing dangers, Jack calculating contingencies, Harleena clutching her pride like armor. When the Black Marrow Lounge finally rose on the horizon, it was less a ship than a floating fortress. Its black hull gleamed like oil under the moonlight, etched with carvings that writhed like serpents when the waves broke against them. The crimson Skua banner of the Pennwrights flared in the wind, a promise of power and menace. The Crows exchanged a single glance, and though no words passed between them, the meaning was clear: this was it. No turning back.

Harleena hadn’t forgiven them; the room could feel it every time she stood too close to Jack and chose not to see him. On the boat over she’d sat angled away, arms folded tight despite the sway, gaze fixed on the gray chop beyond the rail. Now—under the Black Marrow Lounge’s layered light—she wore her anger like a second perfume: cool, controlled, impossible to miss if you knew her. She had dressed with intent. Delicate, yes—but no weaker for it. Dove-gray silk skimmed her frame, cut on the bias so it moved like water when she turned. A charcoal wrap slipped loose at one shoulder, showing the pale column of her neck and the fine pulse at its hollow. Onyx drops hung at her ears, small as teardrops, catching candlelight whenever she tipped her head. Her hair—usually braided for work—was loosened and pinned with a mother-of-pearl comb, strands left free to frame her mouth when she smiled. Even the choice of gloves said something: gossamer lace to the wrist, more suggestion than armor, a promise of skin that never quite arrived. When Jack murmured a plan at her shoulder, she didn’t answer; the only reply was a fractional pause in the lift of her glass. When Harry tried a small joke to ease the air, she granted him a thin, polite curve of the mouth that never warmed her eyes. But when Rabbit caught her look and said, simply, “We need you,” the set of her jaw softened by a hair’s breadth. She gave the smallest of nods. Mission first. After, the reckoning.

Led into the common lounge, the sheer decadence pressed down on them. Velvet drapes, chandeliers heavy with crystal, laughter spilling like wine from every table. Men and women in finery threw coin and drink with equal abandon, oblivious to the shadows beneath the splendor. Beyond the velvet ropes, the VIP area pulsed with quieter, sharper energy—a sanctum for those whose names carried weight and blood in equal measure. Rabbit leaned toward Harry, speaking

low enough for only their group to hear. “The meeting’s there. Has to be.” His eyes flicked to the guarded entrance. “We just need a way inside.”

Harry’s gaze swept the room, calculating. “Then we find Alaric,” he murmured. “Take his place. Nicolas said it’s our only shot.” Jack’s eyes had already locked onto the man: scarred cheek, iron scowl, a pair of bodyguards like wolves at his side. He tipped his chin toward the blackjack table. “There. And he’s not in the mood to be trifled with.”

They’d tagged Alaric quickly: the scar, the pair of vigilant heavies, the bad mood gone worse by the minute as the house cleaned him on the turn. Jack ghosted behind the dealer’s elbow, fingers patient as rain, and the deck changed nature without changing faces. Alaric’s luck upended as if a tide had turned somewhere no one could see; a man drowning learned to breathe again. His laugh got loud. The guards eased a fraction.

Harleena took her moment. At the bar she let the wrap slip another finger’s width, leaned into the lamp-warmth, and ordered a drink to be sent. When Alaric’s gaze found her, she didn’t grin like a girl who’d been noticed—she looked like a woman who had chosen him. Chin lowered, eyes lifted through lashes. A slow exhale past painted lips. The smallest tilt of her wrist, baring the inside of it to the air the way a swordsman shows a throat: not surrender, demonstration.

He came as called, dragging his good mood behind him like a cape. Up close he smelled of too-expensive cologne and a new kind of greed. The gun under his jacket rode high and wrong on his ribs, security be damned; money bought exceptions out here. His smile flashed knives. “Thank you for the drink,” he said, and practiced charm skated over the bruise of his earlier losses. “You’re welcome,” she purred, letting the vowels lengthen, a soft rasp at the end, the kind of voice that makes a man lean closer to hear and forget the room is listening. She set her glass down with a click he’d feel more than hear. “I couldn’t help admiring your run. It’s rare to watch luck learn some manners.”

“It’s not luck,” he said too quickly, chest swelling. “It’s reading the game.”

“Then read me,” she breathed, stepping close enough that the onyx drops swung and brushed her throat. She didn’t touch him; she let proximity do the work, the animal part of his brain already counting heartbeats. “Come have a smoke in the private lounge. I’ll trade you a tell for a story.” He flicked a look at his guards. Suspicion gnawed through the lacquer of his new fortune. His grin held, thinner. “Go ahead and smoke,” he said, careful, calculating. “I’ll be right here.”

She let disappointment touch her face like a passing shadow—brief, striking, believable. Then she covered it with a smile he’d later replay in his room when the lamps were low. “Don’t make me wait,” she said, turning toward the smoking annex with a slow, deliberate sway, silk brushing at her knees. At the doorway she half-turned—not to Jack, not to Harry, but toward the empty space between them—so that when Jack searched for her eyes, he saw only the smooth line of her cheek and the cold glint of onyx at her ear. The message was clear: *I’m here for the job, not for you.* She disappeared into the haze like a promise, trailed by a pair of curious onlookers. Alaric stared after her, his drink forgotten, his guards suddenly forced to watch in two directions at once.

Even at a distance, her performance was pure craft: flicking ash from her cigarette to show the curve of her wrist; lifting her chin to exhale, throat bare, eyes half-closed; letting the clink of glass against glass punctuate a murmur that meant nothing but felt like everything. From the periphery, Jack didn’t linger on her. He tracked the guards’ divided attention, the rise and fall of Alaric’s breathing, and the way the nearest camera’s blind spot shifted with the ship’s roll. Harry, meanwhile, studied the velvet rope at the VIP entrance—counting footmen, timing intervals—while his eyes kept flicking to Rabbit for the signal. Harleena never looked back. She

moved like the room already belonged to her—soft as smoke, sharp with intent—and left Alaric's imagination to do the work no blade could tonight: open a door.

Jack prowled the casino floor like a fox in a henhouse, his eyes flicking from face to face, scanning for an opening. The lounge hummed with noise—cards snapping against felt, laughter spilling over from the dice tables, glasses clinking under the chandeliers—but beneath it all Jack heard only the thrum of his own pulse. He needed a mark. Someone he could peel away from the herd without raising suspicion. The first security guard he approached was a wall of meat in a pressed uniform, jaw square as a dockside anvil. Jack slipped into his role with practiced ease, putting a nervous quiver in his voice. "Excuse me, mate, could you point me to the toilets?" The man didn't so much as tilt his head. "Figure it out yourself," he grunted, brushing past without a glance. Jack's smile held, though it pulled tight at the edges. He let the frustration wash over him, then buried it beneath that careful mask of self-deprecation. Not this one. Move on. His gaze swept the room again until he spotted a second guard—slighter frame, more approachable, a hint of friendliness softening the stern lines of his face. Jack straightened his shoulders, summoned a sheepish grin, and walked over. "Sorry to bother you," he said, lowering his voice to something politely uncertain. "First time here, and I can't seem to find the smoking area. Could you point me in the right direction?" The guard looked at him, blinked, then smiled. A genuine smile. Jackpot. "Of course, sir. It can be a bit confusing if you're new. I'll walk you there."

Jack forced a grateful laugh. "That's very kind of you. Appreciate it." They moved through the tide of bodies, Jack keeping the chatter light, casual—comments about the crowd, the layout of the place, all laced with nervous energy he didn't need to fake. Every step brought him closer to the annex, where he knew Harleena would be waiting. The thought of her made his gut twist; he could still see the look she'd given him after the powder incident, the venom in her eyes. He'd confessed his guilt, laid himself bare for once, but her silence since then had been louder than any curse. As they reached the threshold of the smoking area, the guard nodded and started to step away. Jack tightened his grip on the man's arm, smiling in a way meant to look embarrassed, but the steel underneath was hard enough to cut. "Actually, would you mind showing me exactly where? I don't want to get lost again. Hate looking like a fool." The guard chuckled and humored him, stepping into the dim annex. The moment they crossed the line into shadows, Harleena emerged. She was smoke and silk in the low light, every line of her body radiating controlled allure. A delicate dress clung to her frame, its fabric catching the glow of lanterns like spilled wine. Her lips curved into a sweet, practiced smile that didn't touch her eyes. "Thank you for helping my friend," she said, voice soft as honey.

The guard turned, caught by her presence—and that's when Jack struck. A sharp blow to the temple, quick and clinical. The man staggered, eyes wide. Before he could recover, Harleena stepped in, all grace and venom. Her hand snapped forward, driving into his solar plexus. The breath whooshed out of him in a ragged gasp. He crumpled, choking on the floor. Jack knelt without hesitation, stripping the uniform with efficient hands. His face was tight with urgency, but inside there was a thrum of doubt—if she hadn't moved with him, if she'd hesitated, the whole maneuver might've collapsed. He didn't look at her, afraid of what her eyes might say. "Hurry," he muttered, tugging the cap free. "We don't have much time." Harleena kept watch, arms crossed, her posture deceptively casual but her jaw set hard. Her eyes darted between shadows, scanning for intruders, though she stole quick glances at Jack. She hadn't forgiven him—her stiff shoulders, the cold precision of her movements, they all screamed of a wound still raw—but she was here. She hadn't walked away.

"You did great, Jack," she said finally, voice low, measured, and without warmth. Her eyes never left the doorway. "Now move fast before someone notices." Jack slipped into the uniform,

adjusting the belt, pulling the cap low. He glanced up at her with a faint smirk that didn't quite reach his eyes. "How do I look?" She turned then, studied him, and for the briefest moment there was a flicker of something softer—admiration, maybe relief. It was gone as quick as it came. "Like a man who belongs here," she said, tone smooth, her face unreadable. Jack rose to his feet, squared his shoulders. He was ready now, the disguise settling on him like a second skin. The tension in his chest eased into cold focus. "Alright. Let's make this count." Harleena gave a single nod, her gaze sharp as glass. "We're one step closer," she said, her voice calm but heavy with unspoken distance. "Let's get back to Alaric and find a way into that VIP lounge." They stood there for a breath, the unconscious guard between them—a symbol of what they could still do together, and what stood broken between them. Then Harleena turned away first, her steps graceful but clipped. She didn't need to look back for Jack to follow. Loyalty to the mission still tethered them, but affection—that was another matter entirely.

Meanwhile, Rabbit's Foot pushed back from the blackjack table, the scrape of his chair lost in the hum of dice rolls and drunken laughter. His pulse was quick, but his smile was easy, like a man with nothing but time. Inside, though, a storm raged—an idea had caught him, bold and stupid enough that it felt like the kind of thing fate might just reward. "Let's see how you like this, Lady Luck," he muttered under his breath, straightening his coat as if it were armor. He crossed the casino floor with the swagger of a man who'd already won, each step carrying him closer to the door where a guard stood posted. The guard's eyes tracked him with suspicion, hand resting near his belt. "Can I help you?" the man asked, his voice flat, unwelcoming. Rabbit didn't blink. "I need to speak with Oskar Pennwright. Urgently." The name landed heavy, pulling a ripple of tension into the space between them. The guard narrowed his eyes, a half-smirk tugging at his mouth. "You even know who you're asking for? Oskar Pennwright isn't some dealer you tip a coin to. He owns this ship. He's the boss of everyone in here. What could you possibly have to say to him?" Rabbit leaned closer, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. His words smelled of danger and confidence in equal measure. "It's in his best interest to talk to me. Trust me—it's urgent." The guard scoffed, crossing his arms, but there was a flicker of unease in his eyes. "Why would Mr. Pennwright waste his time with you? What's so damn urgent you need to bother him right now?"

Rabbit held the man's gaze, calm as a cardsharp with a royal flush tucked in his sleeve. "I can't tell you the details," he said softly, "but if you don't pass on my message, you might end up responsible for a catastrophe. Do you want that on your conscience?" That landed. The guard shifted his weight, trying to decide if Rabbit was bluffing or dead serious. It was the look gamblers wore when the pot grew too big and the cards too uncertain. Rabbit didn't waver, his eyes steady, alive with a fire that promised ruin—or revelation. Finally, the guard clicked his tongue and muttered, "Wait here." He turned to a colleague, speaking in low tones, and Rabbit caught the sidelong glances, the whispers passed between them like sparks. The tension in the air stretched, thick and electric. Any second now, it could snap one way or the other. Rabbit didn't move. He just stood there, hands clasped behind his back like he was already in control, whispering to the dice-throwing gods above: "Come on, Lady Luck. Don't fold on me now."

Harleena returned to Alaric with the same deliberate sway that had first caught his eye, her perfume cutting through the smoke and brandy-stale air. He was already flushed from his winning streak, chips piled in front of him like miniature monuments to his greed. His grin was wide but crooked, and when his gaze slid up her figure it carried no trace of respect—only the calculation of a man already rehearsing what he'd do if she gave him the chance. "Back so soon?" Alaric asked, voice heavy with the smugness of someone who'd been given attention and assumed it was worship. His hand tapped the rim of his glass. "Couldn't wait to watch me play again?" Harleena leaned on the bar beside him, careful not to recoil under his leering look. Her smile was soft, almost conspiratorial. "Cards are fine," she said, tilting her head, "but they only tell half the story. I was hoping to know the man behind the luck." She let the words hang, just long enough for his imagination to fill in the gaps. Alaric chuckled, loud and graceless, but

there was hunger in the sound. “I’m not the sort to turn down a lady’s curiosity,” he said, his eyes roving her silk neckline.

Before she could steer him further, Jack slid in from the periphery. He looked every inch the part: crisp white jacket, dark trousers, the discreet pin of Pennwright’s crest on his breast pocket. His posture was deferential but not weak, his voice pitched just right between professional courtesy and quiet authority. “Mr. Alaric,” Jack said, bowing slightly. “Mr. Pennwright sends his regards. He asked me personally to ensure you have the best evening the Lounge can provide.” Alaric’s chest swelled at the mention of Pennwright, as though the acknowledgment had validated his worth. “Did he now?” he said, smirking. “Well, about damn time.” Harleena seized the moment with a sparkle in her eyes, turning toward Jack with feigned excitement. “Best evening, you say? Does that include a private tour?” She brushed Alaric’s sleeve lightly with her fingers, letting the gesture linger. “I’ve heard this ship is full of secrets. I’d love to see them. Don’t you think that sounds… thrilling?” Her gaze snapped back to Alaric, and the intent was unmistakable: this was for him, for tonight, for whatever he wanted to imagine happening once they were alone. Alaric’s breath hitched, just enough for Jack to notice. He downed the rest of his drink and slammed the glass on the bar. “A private tour,” he said, licking his lips. “Now that’s an offer I’ll take. Nothing I’d like more than to show a beautiful woman like you I’ve got more than luck in my hands.”

His guards shifted, uneasy, but Alaric waved them close. “You’re coming with,” he barked. “I’m not walking into some corner alone. Not with this kind of company.” Jack dipped his head, hiding the sharp glint in his eyes. “As you wish, sir. The Black Marrow is yours tonight.” Harleena let a low laugh escape her, her hand brushing Alaric’s shoulder as if the thought of protection thrilled her. “Two guards, three of us, a whole ship… seems very safe,” she purred, though her eyes flicked past Jack just for an instant, sharp as a knife. The message in that glance was clear: *play along, don’t blow it.* With the guards falling into step, the odd procession began—Harleena leaning into Alaric’s arm, Jack leading with the posture of a trusted host, and two shadows at their back watching everything with suspicion. Every corridor they entered, every turn of the boat’s gleaming interior, felt less like luxury and more like a trap they were building themselves. And that, Jack thought grimly, was exactly the plan.

Jack led the small entourage through a side door, the heavy velvet curtain parting like the entrance to a stage. Behind them, the Black Marrow Lounge still buzzed with noise—dice clattering, glasses chiming, laughter rising and falling in waves—but here, in the ship’s arteries, the sound dulled, swallowed by thick carpets and paneled walls. The corridors were dimmer, lit by wall sconces shaped like stylized Skua heads, their glass eyes glowing faintly with electroplasmic light. The ship’s hum was louder here: the mechanical heartbeat of engines and pumps beneath their feet. Alaric’s arm was heavy around Harleena’s shoulders, his gait just a little unsteady from drink and overconfidence. She tolerated the weight, her smile perfectly poised, though her body carried a tension like a violin string—beautiful, but one wrong note away from snapping. The two guards followed close behind, boots muffled but presence undeniable, each of them scanning corners and mirrors with disciplined vigilance. Jack walked a half-step ahead, his new uniform hanging just loose enough to mask the stiffness in his shoulders. Every movement was calculated: the relaxed swing of an employee familiar with these halls, the polite deference of someone serving Pennwright’s elite. His eyes, however, flicked constantly—corners, doors, cameras, shadows—every detail recorded.

It was then they passed into a narrower hallway, and there he was. Rabbit’s Foot. Leaning against a wall like he’d been born to it, flamboyance radiating even in the gloom. His coat gleamed faintly in the sconce-light, a splash of theatrical color against the polished wood. And he wasn’t alone. One of the security guards—broad-shouldered, granite-faced, the sort who should’ve been a silent sentinel—was standing opposite him, laughing. Not chuckling, not smirking: *laughing.* Full-bodied, head-tilted laughter, as Rabbit gestured with a flourish like a

magician mid-trick. Jack slowed, just a fraction, letting Alaric and Harleena drift a pace ahead. He raised two fingers in a subtle wave, his brow lifting, trying to catch Rabbit's eye. The signal was small, a thief's semaphore meant to say *now, it's moving, stay sharp.* But Rabbit didn't see it. He was mid-story, his hands painting shapes in the air, and the guard was leaning in, nodding, hanging on the words. For a moment Jack felt a surge of irritation, that cold little spike of fear masked as anger: *we don't have time for games, Rabbit.* Harleena felt it too. She glanced back just once, the movement so slight Alaric might not have noticed at all. Her gaze lingered on Rabbit for only a heartbeat, then slid back to Jack, her lips curving in a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. It was the kind of smile that said: *do you see this? do you trust him?* Jack answered with the smallest shake of his head, then smoothed it into a bow, ushering them further into the hall.

Alaric, oblivious, was too busy basking in Harleena's proximity. He leaned closer, whispering something lewd, and she rewarded him with a soft laugh and the touch of her hand on his sleeve. The guards at his back, though, were not so easily distracted—they'd noticed Rabbit, and though they didn't break stride, Jack caught the way one narrowed his eyes, suspicion flickering. The air felt thicker here, as if the ship itself sensed the con tightening around them. Every footstep seemed to echo with consequence. Jack's jaw tightened. He forced himself to keep walking, leading them deeper into the bowels of the Black Marrow. He prayed Rabbit knew what he was doing, because the entire structure of their fragile deception—Harleena's seduction, Jack's disguise, Harry's shadowing steps behind—depended on perfect timing. And Rabbit, grinning like a king holding court with a single guard, was seconds away from being summoned to Oskar Pennwright himself. Whether that would doom them all or open a door none of them had dared dream of… no one could yet say.

The small group moved through the lavish corridors of the Black Marrow Lounge, their footsteps softened by plush carpets embroidered with the Pennwright crest. Gaslight sconces flickered along the walls, casting long, liquid shadows that seemed to slither and stretch with the sway of the ship. Harleena clung to Alaric's arm, her laughter low and musical, a sound designed to stroke a man's ego until it purred. Her perfume—something floral, with a bite of smoke—lingered in the air between them, and Alaric drank it in like a man already halfway drowned. His bodyguards followed in lockstep, their eyes sharp even if their hands hovered casually near the bulges of concealed weapons. Every flicker of movement in the hall made them stiffen; they didn't trust this detour, not for a second. As they descended deeper into the vessel, the décor shifted. Velvet gave way to steel, the glow of chandeliers replaced with harsher lamps that buzzed faintly. The air cooled, tinged with machine oil, and the floor beneath them vibrated with the ship's mechanical pulse. Alaric barely noticed. Emboldened by drink and the softness pressed against his side, he carried himself like a man convinced fortune smiled only on him tonight.

"You know," he slurred, his voice pitched low and smug, "I've been to a lot of places, but this… this is something else." Harleena tilted her head up at him, her eyes glinting with the practiced sparkle of someone who knew exactly what to give and what to withhold. Her fingers toyed with the lapel of his jacket, tracing the fabric like it was his skin. "Oh, I bet you say that to all the girls," she teased, letting the words glide off her tongue with practiced playfulness. "But I have to admit, this place does have its charms. So dark… so private." Jack, walking a pace ahead in his stolen uniform, kept his stride calm and his posture deferential, but his voice carried authority when he spoke. "Mr. Pennwright takes great pride in his establishment," he said smoothly, each syllable crafted to sell the illusion. "He wanted to ensure you experienced its… finer details. The machinery room is one of the ship's best-kept secrets. Most patrons never even know it exists." Alaric's grin widened, his teeth flashing in the half-light. "Sounds like my kind of place," he said, puffing up his chest. "Full of secrets."

Harleena pressed closer, her lips nearly brushing his ear, her voice a sultry whisper. "And maybe… you'll discover a few more before the night's over." Her words were a blade wrapped in silk, and Alaric, drunk on both liquor and suggestion, swallowed them whole. Behind them, Harry ghosted along in the shadows of the corridor. His steps were soundless, his expression unreadable, though his eyes never left the guards' shifting hands or the twitch in their jaws. He followed at just enough distance to be forgotten, yet close enough to spring should the illusion collapse. As they neared the heavy steel door to the machinery room, the tension sharpened. One of the guards broke his silence, leaning in close to his employer, his voice gravel in the dim hall. "Sir," he muttered, "this doesn't feel right. We should turn back." But Alaric, intoxicated and enraptured, waved him off with a scoff. "Relax," he slurred, tightening his grip on Harleena's waist. "What could go wrong? We're guests of Oskar, remember?"

Jack paused at the threshold, letting the moment breathe, then swept the door open with a crisp, practiced flourish. Beyond lay a dim chamber that thrummed with power: steel ribs and pistons gleaming in the weak lamplight, the low hum of engines vibrating through the air like a bass note that never ceased. Shadows pooled in the corners, making the place feel more like a cathedral than a workshop—a temple to industry, secrecy, and control. "After you," Jack murmured, dipping his head in a courteous bow, his voice soft but edged with purpose. Alaric didn't hesitate. Lust and arrogance carried him forward as if the universe itself had conspired to deliver this moment to him. He dragged Harleena in with him, his eyes glazed with drink and hunger. The guards followed reluctantly, their gazes raking every corner, suspicion etched deep in their faces, but unwilling to contradict their employer's desire.

As the heavy door shut behind them with a metallic thud, the outside world vanished. The muffled din of the casino floor dissolved into silence broken only by the engines' steady hum. The intimacy of the darkness wrapped around them, thick and suffocating. Harleena tilted her head, brushing her lips against Alaric's cheek, her voice low enough that it carried like smoke. "Now… where were we?" Alaric grinned, slack and hungry, tilting toward her with all the subtlety of a drowning man clutching at a rope. "Right where we should be," he murmured, leaning in for a kiss. And still—he hadn't the faintest idea how close the trap was to snapping shut around him.

The air grew thicker, oppressive, as if the ship itself was holding its breath. Anticipation hung over them, heavy and waiting to snap. Then—*a sound*. A faint rustle from the shadows, sharp enough to cut through the steady hum of the engines. "What was that?" Alaric slurred, his eyes narrowing drunkenly, his voice curious but slow, syrupy with alcohol. His guards tensed instantly, hands moving toward their weapons. They never got the chance. Harry struck from the darkness with silent precision, his fist driving into the nearest guard's throat. The man's eyes bulged, a choked gasp caught in his windpipe before his knees buckled, sending him sprawling without so much as a cry for help. "What the—" Alaric started, his words thick with confusion. He turned just in time to see Harleena's silhouette shift—her body all grace and cruelty in one motion. She pivoted smoothly, her hand snapping out in a dancer's arc, the heel of her palm connecting with his temple.

His eyes widened, a flicker of realization sparking in the blurred haze—betrayal dawning on him in the instant before his body gave out. Then he crumpled, dead weight in her arms, unconscious before he even hit the ground. "Sir!" the second guard barked, panic sharpening his voice. He lunged for Jack, fists swinging in desperation. Jack caught the blow on his forearm, the impact rattling through him, and suddenly the two were locked in a vicious grapple. The fight was ugly, close, *real*. The guard was a wall of muscle, his breath hot and foul as he drove Jack back against the cold steel wall, forearm pressing against Jack's throat. Jack clawed at the man's wrist, his lungs screaming for air, stars flickering at the edge of his vision. "Not so fast," Harry's voice snapped from behind, quick and cool. A blur of movement—then a sharp *crack* as his strike landed between the guard's shoulder blades. The man staggered, his grip

loosening just enough. Jack shoved him back with a desperate burst of strength, sucking in ragged breaths as his vision tunneled.

But the struggle had taken its toll. His head swam, the corridor tilting sideways. His knees gave out, and with one last swing that cut only air, Jack crumpled to the floor, half-conscious. “Damn it,” Harleena hissed, already kneeling at his side. She checked Alaric quickly—pulse steady, still breathing—then turned her focus to Jack. “We don’t have time for this.” Her voice was tight, but her fingers were steady as they pressed into the pressure points at his neck and shoulder. “Come on, Jack. Don’t you dare quit on me.” Jack groaned, his eyelids fluttering. The world came back in fragments—the ache in his throat, the metallic tang of blood, Harleena’s face above him, caught between anger and something softer. “What… what happened?” he rasped.

“Nothing you can’t handle,” she quipped, though the worry in her eyes betrayed the bravado. She pulled him upright, slinging one of his arms over her shoulders. “Now get it together. We’ve got a meeting to crash.” While she worked, Harry was already stripping off Alaric’s coat, his expression tight with focus. He pulled the unconscious man’s features into himself with a shimmer of magic, flesh reshaping until Alaric’s scar, smirk, and disheveled hair stared back from Harry’s face. He tugged the coat into place, adjusting the lapels. Then he turned, flashing a quick grin. “Well? How do I look?” Harleena, still supporting Jack, shot him a sharp look, then a curt nod. “Convincing enough. Just don’t get cocky.” She kicked the limp guard’s body into the corner, already pulling the uniform shirt over her own frame. The air was thick with sweat, smoke, and the iron tang of blood. Outside the door, the casino still roared on, oblivious. And inside this steel belly of the Black Marrow Lounge, the Crows’ plan clicked to its next, dangerous step.

She tied her hair back, tugged on the guard’s cap, and adjusted it until she looked the part. The transformation was remarkable—her posture shifted, movements sharp and composed, exuding the cool authority of someone accustomed to handling trouble. Jack, now on his feet—though still a bit unsteady—took a steadying breath. “Let’s hope this works.”

“Don’t worry,” Harry said, slipping easily into Alaric’s slightly drunken swagger as he straightened his collar. “With you escorting us, no one will ask questions.” The trio, now fully disguised, strode through the ship’s corridors with purpose. Jack led the way, and Harry and Harleena followed close behind, embodying their roles with practiced ease. To anyone watching, they were just another set of high-profile guests en route to a private meeting. All that remained was to get there—then the next phase of their plan could begin. As they neared their destination, the tension thickened with each step. They were close now. Danger hovered in the silence, but with sharp minds, quick reflexes, and a little luck, they might just pull it off.

The corridor seemed to grow narrower with every step, the ship’s iron bulk pressing down on Rabbit's Foot like the walls were conspiring to remind him how small he was in this place. His grin lingered on his lips—habitual, practiced—but his chest tightened with each breath. Ahead, the guard pushed open a heavy door, and a breath of thick cigar smoke rolled out, curling into the dim corridor like a warning. Rabbit's Foot stepped inside. The chamber was a sanctum, a world apart from the glittering chaos above. Velvet curtains smothered the portholes, denying even the sea entry here. A chandelier hung low, its glow warped by smoke, throwing shifting shadows across the walls like silent sentinels. The air was thick with the smell of tobacco, expensive liquor, and something harder to place—a metallic tang, like rust or blood, that seemed to cling to the tongue. At the center of it all sat Oskar Pennwright.

He wasn’t tall, nor particularly imposing in build, but his presence filled the room. Stocky and broad-shouldered, he had the posture of a man who knew he didn’t need size to command fear. His face was sharp and weathered, pitted by years of surviving in Doskvol’s darkest alleys and richest halls. A black eyepatch covered his left eye, leather straps pulled tight against his

temple. Rumor whispered that beneath it lay something more than flesh, more than scar—a secret talisman of unimaginable power: the Umbral Eye. His one good eye glittered with a cold intelligence, sizing Rabbit's Foot up the moment he crossed the threshold. It was not the gaze of a man curious about who had entered his domain—it was the gaze of a predator, already calculating outcomes, already knowing the odds. He drew slowly on his cigar, ember glowing bright, smoke wreathing his head like a crown. Three guards flanked him, silent as statues, their hands folded but never far from hidden steel. They weren't there to protect him—they were there to make sure he didn't have to lift a finger. Rabbit's pulse thudded hard in his chest. His smile held, but in the back of his mind the question itched, sharp and relentless: *Why did I walk into this?* Pennwright wasn't just a man tonight—he was the Black Marrow Lounge itself, every roll of dice, every card flipped, every whispered deal. He owned the walls, the air, the luck, the fear. And under that eyepatch, he carried a power that could strip a man's soul bare. Still, Rabbit walked forward, step by step. The gambler's mask stayed fixed on his face, but his heart drummed faster, a rhythm too quick to ignore. He clung to the only faith he had left—Lady Luck. But even she seemed to hesitate at the threshold of this room. Pennwright leaned back in his chair, smoke curling from his lips as he spoke. His voice was low, steady, soaked in amusement and menace all at once.

"Well, well. Look what's washed up on my deck. A Crow."

The room seemed to breathe against Rabbit's Foot as he stepped inside, every surface heavy with Oskar Pennwright's presence. It wasn't just a chamber; it was a throne room disguised as an office, the kind of place where decisions weren't merely made—they were *declared.* Velvet drapes drowned the light, leaving only the amber glow of wall lamps and the low shimmer from a chandelier swaying overhead, its crystals catching smoke in their facets. The air smelled of damp wood, tobacco, and iron. And in the center of it all sat Pennwright. He was built like a man carved out of brick and fed on cruelty, broad shoulders straining against a tailored jacket that gleamed faintly in the gloom. A cigar smoldered in his thick fingers, the ember burning like a coal. One eye regarded Rabbit's Foot with sharp, predatory precision; the other was hidden beneath a heavy black patch, an eyepiece stitched into the skin so snug it seemed a part of him. Beneath that patch, Rabbit's Foot knew, lay the infamous Umbral Eye—an artifact of whispered terror, capable of peeling back thoughts like pages in a book.

"Welcome, Rabbit's Foot," Pennwright said, his voice a smooth growl, every syllable vibrating with practiced menace. Then, after a heartbeat's pause, he let the thin curl of a smile touch his lips. "Or should I call you by your *real* name… Victor." The sound of it shattered Rabbit's Foot's composure for the barest instant. His pulse spiked, his fingers twitched. No one knew that name. Not Jack, not Harleena, not even the shadows he had confessed his sins to in drunken solitude. "Victor" belonged to a life buried and drowned, a name locked away in silence. Yet here it was, dragged into the open, wielded like a blade. Pennwright's grin widened, savoring the wound. "Surprised?" he asked softly, tapping ash into a crystal tray with unhurried ease. "Don't be. The Umbral Eye isn't some parlor trick—it *sees*. Deeper than any thief dares to bury their secrets. You wear masks, Rabbit's Foot, but I see the man beneath. I see Victor."

The name lingered in the air, poisonous. Rabbit's Foot swallowed the bile rising in his throat, forcing his face back into its familiar, cocky grin. It was thinner now, stretched taut across nerves that wanted to snap. He tipped his head slightly, playing at confidence. "Then you already know why I'm here. No sense in wasting your time." Pennwright chuckled—a low, dark vibration, more threat than humor. Smoke curled from his lips, slow and deliberate, coiling toward the ceiling like the movements of something alive. "Oh, I know many things," he said. "I know you slithered into my lounge tonight with your charm and your luck, thinking you could turn the tide. I know you've been playing at loyalties you don't really believe in. And I know…" He leaned forward, eye glinting with cruel light. "…you didn't come here for friendship. You came for an *alliance.* With me." The words landed like stones in Rabbit's Foot's chest. His palms slickened. Every instinct

told him to flee, but the doors were locked by more than just steel—Pennwright *was* the Black Marrow Lounge. The walls, the guards, the silence. There was no escape. Only the game in front of him. Still, he made his voice steady. “You’re a man who already has everything,” Rabbit’s Foot said. “What could I possibly offer you?”

The mob boss’s smile dissolved, leaving behind something far colder. He leaned forward, both elbows pressing into the desk, his thick fingers steepling in front of him. His single visible eye pinned Rabbit’s Foot like a predator studying prey too bold to run. “Offer me an explanation,” Pennwright said softly. The room contracted around those words. Even the guards by the walls seemed to shift, as if the weight of that demand pressed on them too. “Why,” Pennwright continued, voice low and dangerous, “should I allow you or your friends to leave this ship alive? Why shouldn’t I have you dragged out and tossed into the sea like every other rat that tries to bargain with me? Why…” he drew out the word, letting it coil, “…should I hand you Merrow Valesque?” Rabbit’s Foot felt his throat tighten, each second stretching longer than the last. He measured the distance to the door, the guards’ stance, the smoke in the air. No openings. No escape routes. Only the knife edge he balanced on. “I came here for Merrow,” he admitted finally, choosing every word with surgical care. “That much, you already know. Tell me your price.” Pennwright’s laugh was brief, humorless. He leaned back again, taking a long drag on the cigar. The orange ember lit his face in harsh light, carving shadows deeper into the lines of his jowls, into the ridges of his brow. The smoke exhaled was a suffocating curtain, blurring the air between them. “My price…” he said at last, his tone almost tender—too tender. “I want you, Victor. Not your coins. Not your tricks. *You.*” The word snapped the air taut. “Your servitude,” Pennwright clarified, his eye gleaming as he tilted his head. “You will be my eyes among your friends. You will whisper their secrets into my ear, carry my orders into their plans. And when I command, you will obey.”

Rabbit’s Foot’s mask cracked, just for an instant. His grin faltered into something brittle. “You want me to betray the Crows,” he said, his voice quieter, as though saying it aloud might seal the doom. Pennwright’s smile slashed across his face once more. He leaned in close, his voice dropping to a guttural growl. “Why not? You’ve already betrayed them tonight by coming here. What’s one more treachery, Victor… between friends?” The silence that followed pressed down like a physical weight, thick and choking. Rabbit’s Foot’s heart pounded, each beat the toll of a clock running out of time. Every path was walled off. Every option felt like poison. The only way forward was through. Rabbit’s Foot’s mouth was dry, his tongue dragging like sandpaper as he forced the words out. “I need more than just information on Valesque,” he said, voice steady on the surface but betraying tremors underneath. He needed time, *any* time. “If I agree to this… what else are you offering?”

Pennwright’s expression didn’t flicker—if anything, the stillness was worse. Then, ever so slowly, his lips peeled back into something halfway between a smile and a sneer, teeth flashing in the dim light. “You think you’re in a position to negotiate?” The words dripped contempt, rolling off his tongue with deliberate venom. He leaned forward, puffing smoke directly into Rabbit’s Foot’s face. “Don’t be foolish, Victor. You’re mine now. Do as I say, and I might—*might*—consider giving you what you want. Defy me…” He let the words hang, savoring the pause like a predator circling before the strike. “…and you and your friends vanish into the sea. No bodies. No names. No whispers. Gone.” The room seemed to tilt with those words, reality itself skewed by the raw force of Pennwright’s authority. Rabbit’s Foot’s pulse thundered in his ears. This wasn’t a man bargaining—this was a man writing destiny with every syllable, the Umbral Eye smoldering unseen beneath that black patch like a curse waiting to be revealed.

Rabbit’s Foot forced himself to hold the gaze. To blink, to falter, would be death. He let the grin return, though it felt brittle, like porcelain about to shatter. “You think you can just *mess* with me?” he asked, the bravado sharp but desperate. He jabbed a finger toward his own temple. “Go ahead, read me. See the dealings I’ve had with demons. See the debts I owe. You really

want that poison swimming in *your* business?" For a heartbeat, silence. Then, Pennwright laughed. Not loudly—not with the belly of a drunk—but softly, controlled, a chilling rasp that coiled in the back of the throat. His one eye glimmered with a dark amusement, predatory and cold.

He rose, deliberately, heavy hands pressing against the arms of the chair until the wood creaked. The guards stiffened like shadows brought to life, but Pennwright didn't need them—his presence was weapon enough. The cigar burned low in his grip as he strolled across the room, his shoes clicking against the polished floorboards. Rabbit's Foot tensed as Pennwright approached a heavy set of curtains draped against the wall. The mob boss paused, savoring the moment. Then, with a slow, deliberate gesture, he seized the cord and pulled. The curtains yawned open. "Alright, Victor," Pennwright murmured, his voice low, dangerous silk. "You want to play games? Then let me show you the stakes." The window revealed a chamber below, shaped like a private auditorium. Thirty figures sat in silence, hoods concealing their faces, their cloaks pooling like dark rivers around them. They were utterly still, their posture rigid, their attention pinned toward the stage at the far end of the room. And on that stage, lit by a pale, clinical glow, rested a glass box. Rabbit's Foot stepped closer, unable to stop himself. His heartbeat was a drum in his chest, each strike harder than the last. He searched the shadows below, but the silence was absolute. Not a cough, not a murmur—just the quiet of people too used to waiting for blood.

Pennwright leaned in beside him, close enough that Rabbit's Foot could smell the acrid bite of his cigar, could feel the oppressive weight of his presence pressing against him. "Watch carefully," Pennwright whispered, that single eye gleaming with cruel amusement. "You might find this… enlightening." Rabbit's Foot's stomach twisted. He didn't know what the glass box held, but he already understood one thing: this wasn't just a negotiation anymore. It was a demonstration. A reminder. That Pennwright wasn't offering choices. He was offering *submission.*

Meanwhile, in the conference room below, Harry and Harleena—hidden behind their stolen uniforms and false identities—sat quietly among the cloaked figures. The space was arranged like an underground theater, rows of chairs in neat semicircles all facing a low stage bathed in the faint glow of chandeliers overhead. The air was heavy with smoke from expensive cigars and the sharper tang of electroplasmic lanterns burning at the far corners. Every shift of fabric, every cough, every whisper carried like a threat in the stillness.

Harry shifted uneasily in his seat. The tension pressed against his ribs like a vice, and his instincts screamed at him that they were teetering on the edge of disaster. He leaned closer to Harleena, keeping his lips barely parted, his voice a ghost of a whisper. "Something's off. I can feel it. We need to stay sharp." Harleena didn't turn her head, but her eyes swept the room with the slow, deliberate care of a predator taking stock of rivals. Her hand rested lightly against her thigh, fingers flexing in subtle readiness.

"This is big," she murmured back, her words almost lost beneath the murmur of cloaks shifting. "These aren't street thugs. Look around—Dimmer agents, Circle lieutenants, Cypher cutthroats, even a few faces from Veylock. This is Doskvol's underworld, gathered in one place. Whatever's happening here, it's not small. It's the kind of thing that rewrites the rules." Before Harry could respond, the lights dimmed, swallowing the room in shadow. The conversations hushed at once, as though cut by a blade. All eyes turned toward the stage where, from the wings, a man emerged with unhurried confidence.

He was sleek in his tuxedo, hair combed back with deliberate precision, and his every step radiated the easy arrogance of someone used to holding court. A practiced smile lit his face,

bright enough to dazzle, sharp enough to cut. He stopped center stage, and when he spoke, his voice filled the chamber as if the room itself bent to carry his words. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, gesturing expansively, “thank you for honoring us with your presence tonight. My name is Leopold, and I have the distinct pleasure of being your humble host—here on behalf of none other than the esteemed Mr. Oskar Pennwright.”

A ripple passed through the assembly—nods of recognition, murmurs of approval, a handful of knowing smirks. The weight of Pennwright’s name was a stone dropped into a still pond, and the ripples spread through every heart present. Leopold’s smile widened, his tone light and conversational, almost playful. “Now, I know what you’re all thinking—‘What could possibly gather so many of Doskvol’s *finest* into a single room?’ And by *finest*, of course, I mean the most notorious, the most dangerous, the most… visionary.”

A few chuckles broke the silence—short, sharp, wary laughs.

Leopold grinned like a man feeding on their discomfort. “But jokes aside, tonight is something more than whispers and wagers. Tonight you’ll be offered a chance to reshape the city itself. Tonight, you’ll witness a marvel that can shift the balance of power forever.”

From the wings, an assistant emerged, carrying a polished metal case no larger than a strongbox. The case glimmered as though its surface had been oiled, catching every beam of light like a lure. The assistant set it gently upon a stand, stepped back with bowed head. Leopold drew out the pause, letting anticipation thicken the room, then flicked the latch and lifted the lid with a flourish. Inside, resting on velvet, was a metallic sphere, no larger than a football, its surface etched with delicate, interlocking patterns that seemed to writhe faintly when the light touched them. The metal wasn’t steel or brass, but something stranger, darker—like it had been dredged up from a drowned city and given cruel new life.

A collective intake of breath hissed through the audience. Leopold lifted the sphere in both hands, raising it high so every pair of eyes could drink in its terrible beauty. The grooves across its surface seemed to pulse faintly, almost alive.

“Folks,” Leopold said, his voice swelling with theatrical pride, “I present to you the *Ladher,* or *Lædir* for the intimate. A weapon unlike any other. Compact. Discreet. Devastating. This unassuming jewel can eliminate a target with surgical precision—and most importantly…” He leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “…leave no trace behind.”

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. He leaned in so close to Harleena that his whisper was little more than breath against her ear. “This is bad. This is worse than bad. That thing… it feels wrong.” Harleena’s eyes stayed fixed on the stage, her lips barely moving. “Keep calm. If what he says is true, we’re sitting on the spark that could ignite half the city.”

Leopold, oblivious or perhaps perfectly aware of the storm his words had conjured, pressed on with showman’s bravado. “Now, I know you must be thinking—‘Leopold, you handsome devil, how can something so small, so elegant, wield such power?’” He paused, savoring the nervous laughter that flickered here and there. “But I assure you, this little beauty is more than meets the eye. The Ladher has been forged with the most cutting-edge advances available to mankind. With a single command…”—he tapped the sphere with a manicured finger, producing a low hum that rippled through the air—“…it can do what an army cannot. It can end wars before they begin. It can silence rivals before they even draw breath. It is not merely a weapon—it is inevitability, sold to the highest bidder.” The silence that followed was suffocating. Every figure in that room understood: they were not just witnessing an auction. They were staring at the future of Doskvol, caged inside a sphere no larger than a man’s skull.

Leopold's grin gleamed like a blade under the dim chandeliers. He held the Ladher aloft as if it were some holy relic, his voice dripping with theatrical pride. "Friends, words can only go so far. You've heard the promises… but tonight, you will *see.*"

A murmur spread like a low tide across the audience. Anticipation. Unease. Hunger. All eyes locked on the stage as an assistant emerged from the wings, wrestling against the thrashing limbs of a massive orangutan. The beast shrieked—raw, primal terror tearing from its throat—as it clawed at the ground, refusing to be dragged forward. The assistant, sweating and cursing under his breath, forced the animal toward the glass enclosure at center stage.

The orangutan's amber eyes shone wide, wild with desperation. It slammed its fists against the assistant, bellowing so loud the chandeliers rattled, before being shoved through the door of the box. The glass shuddered as the beast hurled itself against the walls, palms slapping with a sickening, human-like smack. Its cries cut through the room like knives.

A few of the cloaked figures shifted uncomfortably. One man in the second row covered his mouth with a gloved hand. Another woman's shoulders twitched, as if to flinch—but no one looked away. They couldn't. Leopold chuckled, the sound oily, indulgent. "Ah, I know, I know what you're thinking—'But Leopold, my enemies are not apes.'" A few laughs rose from the room—thin, uneasy. Three figures in the corner cackled louder, letting the ugliness of it linger. The humor curdled almost instantly when a second assistant appeared. This one's grin stretched unnaturally wide, his teeth bared like a predator's as he dragged a limp shape across the stage. The figure he hauled into the light drew a collective gasp.

It was a man. Bound. Beaten. His face swollen and purple, one eye nearly shut. His clothes were torn, bloodied, clinging to him like rags. He stumbled when shoved forward, his knees hitting the floor hard enough to echo through the chamber.

Harry's breath caught in his throat. His hand twitched as if reaching for a wand he couldn't reveal here. "Adrian Blackwood," he hissed to Harleena, his voice low, strangled. "He's one of Lannic's men. A Cypher. That day of the prototype…He… he was captured then, but—I didn't think—"

Harleena's jaw tightened, her blue eyes narrowing like a blade being drawn. She didn't reply. She didn't have to. The assistant's laughter filled the room—loud, grotesque, booming like carnival drums. It rang false and cruel, echoing off the glass and metal until Harry felt bile rising in his throat. Adrian was shoved into the enclosure. He crumpled next to the orangutan, wheezing, one arm twitching weakly as he tried to prop himself up. For a fleeting second, his swollen eyes flicked toward the audience. There was no plea for help in them, only the dim spark of a man who *knew* what was coming.

The orangutan, panicked beyond reason, shrieked louder and clung to the broken man, its hands pawing desperately as though begging him to help—or begging him to share its terror. Leopold didn't flinch. His smile was carved in stone. He raised the Ladher high, its strange etchings glinting under the lights, and his voice dropped into a reverent hush that forced everyone else into silence.

"This," he said, "is Ladher in its most concentrated form. In purity, it kills in under thirty minutes. Diluted… the process lingers. Days. Weeks. Perhaps a month. Always invisible. Always inevitable. The choice is yours. A swift execution, or a lingering ghost at your rival's table." His finger tapped a button set into the device. The Ladher began to glow with a pulsing light, faint at first, then stronger, each pulse accompanied by a hollow beep that filled the room with dreadful rhythm.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Leopold's grin widened as though he were about to reveal the punchline of a joke only he found funny. And then, with a casual flick of his wrist, he tossed the device into the glass enclosure. The moment it clattered against the floor, the orb split open with a hiss. A thick purple vapor erupted outward, curling like smoke yet heavier, thicker, alive. It spread rapidly, filling every corner of the box, obscuring the bodies inside until only their shadows writhed against the glass. The orangutan thrashed wildly, its fists hammering against the walls with frantic, deafening booms that rattled the very floor. Adrian coughed, a wet, rattling sound, his body convulsing in silhouette. The smoke grew denser. The hammering slowed. The cries dwindled into muffled gasps. And still, the room sat in reverent silence, forced to bear witness.

The room trembled with sound—screams, roars, sobs—a cacophony of suffering so raw it seemed to vibrate in the bones of every spectator. The orangutan shrieked and clawed at the walls, its massive fists hammering the glass until hairline cracks spiderwebbed along the surface. Its eyes bulged, veins bursting red across them, as the smoke seared its lungs. The beast convulsed, foaming spit and bile spraying the walls in violent streaks.

Adrian's voice joined the nightmare symphony, a strangled, tearing wail that made the cloaked audience members flinch in their seats. His cries turned to choked coughing as the purple vapor clawed through him from the inside out. He slammed his fists against the glass, weaker than the beast beside him, leaving smears of blood where his skin split open. Each breath came as a ragged, rattling scrape, the sound of a man's lungs filling with poison, drowning him slowly while he remained fully conscious. Then came the smell—sickly, acrid, metallic—creeping even through the barriers of the box. Several cloaked figures shifted in their seats, gloved hands twitching toward their faces as though to stifle the bile rising in their throats.

Inside, the orangutan staggered. Its massive body shook in grotesque spasms, every muscle firing at once in a seizure of pure agony. Its tongue lolled from its mouth, blackening, while ropes of saliva and blood dribbled down its chest. It collapsed against Adrian, claws raking his torn shirt as though begging the human for help neither could give. Adrian let out a hoarse scream, his throat shredding itself into raw, animal sound. Blood erupted from his mouth in a spray, painting the glass in a red veil. His eyes rolled white, vessels bursting, dark streaks trailing from his sockets. His body convulsed violently once more, slamming against the orangutan, before seizing into a rigid, twisted arch that looked almost inhuman. The noise dwindled. First the ape, a low keening that gurgled into silence. Then Adrian, whose last breath rasped like sandpaper dragged across stone.

Both fell limp.

The silence that followed was worse than the screaming. The glass box stood clouded in the fading gray, streaked crimson with gore, the walls dripping as if the enclosure itself had begun to bleed. Slowly, the smoke thinned. What remained inside was not life but a tableau of horror: Adrian's body slumped in a heap, neck bent at a wrong angle, blood pooling thick beneath him; the orangutan beside him, limbs splayed like broken branches, its face frozen in a mask of terror, lips peeled back over its teeth. Their stillness was unbearable.

The crowd stared. Some with wide, hungry eyes. Others with the detached curiosity of vultures circling a corpse. Harry's stomach twisted until bile burned at the back of his throat. His fists clenched in his lap, nails biting into his palms. Harleena sat as rigid as stone, her knuckles white as she gripped her cloak, every tendon in her jaw standing out with restrained fury. They could do nothing. Not yet. To move now was death.

Then Leopold turned, smiling with the warmth of a man unveiling a new piece of art. Only there was no warmth. His grin was a knife, and it carved through the tension like butcher's steel. "And with that, folks…" His arms spread wide, welcoming the silence. "Let the bidding begin."

It was as if a switch had been thrown. A rustle of cloaks, gloved hands rising, coded signals flashing across the room. The quiet swelled into a fevered storm of whispers, gestures, murmured numbers—a frenzy of power and wealth clawing for possession of the nightmare.

And all the while, Harry and Harleena sat in the middle of it, their minds burning with one truth that weighed heavier than any disguise: they had just stared into the heart of hell, and hell was for sale.

Rabbit's Foot stood frozen, his lungs refusing to draw a proper breath. The carnage below still pulsed in his mind—the smoke curling in the glass box, the frantic shrieks smothered into silence. Adrian's face was gone now, slack and twisted in death, but Rabbit remembered another version of it. Not broken. Not bloody. The memory came unbidden, sharp as a knife: a dimly lit bar, the stink of cheap liquor, Adrian leaning across the table with a gleam in his eye as he laid out the plan for the convoy. "Two identical carriages," Adrian had said, tapping the rim of his glass. "Both reinforced to carry the load. One's the real deal. The other? Completely empty." He smirked, the kind of smirk men gave when they thought they'd outwitted the entire city. "This is interesting." Rabbit remembered how he'd laughed then, slapping the table, thinking it was clever. Thinking Adrian was clever. That man—the one with ideas and grit—was now nothing more than meat in a glass coffin, offered up to amuse Oskar Pennwright.

Beside him, Pennwright puffed calmly on his cigar, the ember glowing like a predator's eye in the gloom. His voice slithered through the silence, mocking, cruel. "So, Victor… do you still think you want to make an ally of me?" The name was a lash across his back—*Victor.* Always *Victor.* Pennwright wielded it like a blade, flaying away the mask Rabbit had built for years. Rabbit's throat went dry, his body heavy with the weight of it. He couldn't answer. He didn't trust his voice not to crack. Pennwright seemed delighted by the silence, as though every moment Rabbit failed to speak was further proof of his power. He turned slightly, smoke curling from his lips, and his smile sharpened. "You understand, then. Good. Because you can't leave here with what you've seen. Not unless I allow it."

One of his guards stepped forward, raising a pistol lazily, like execution was just another line in the evening's entertainment. Another guard met Rabbit's eyes—and in that instant, Rabbit felt it: the sharp, invasive clawing at his thoughts. The pressure was unmistakable, an attempt to reach inside and rip away what he had just witnessed. It was Jack's trick—he knew it instantly. Memory tampering. Erasure. The man was going to hollow him out. Panic surged, but before it could choke him, heat bloomed under his skin. The sigil flared to life, a faint glow bleeding through the scar where Constant had branded him during their last mission. Protection—against invasive hands, against the theft of his very self. The pressure shattered. The invasive force broke like a wave against rock, leaving Rabbit gasping, dizzy, but intact. His memories were his own. Adrian's face. Adrian's words. The horror. All of it remained. For the first time in his life, Rabbit's Foot felt genuine gratitude for Constant's grim, meticulous paranoia. A silent prayer of thanks ran through his head: *You saved me, old man. You really saved me.* Pennwright watched the exchange with a gleam of dark amusement, his grin widening. The Umbral Eye beneath the patch seemed to pulse faintly, feeding on the tension. "You're full of surprises, Victor," Oskar said, voice smooth and low, as if savoring every syllable. "I do enjoy surprises."

Rabbit's Foot's pulse hammered in his ears. His skin still burned faintly where Constant's sigil had saved him from the mind-wipe, but he knew that reprieve was temporary. Pennwright's guards were shifting their stance, their fingers curling tighter around the triggers, waiting for the order. The weight of the Umbral Eye was on him, pressing like a claw into the marrow of his bones. He couldn't wait. He couldn't outthink the Eye forever. He had to *act.* With one steadying breath, Rabbit slipped a trembling hand into his pocket and brushed the smooth, cold surface of the trinket: the *Veil.* His thumb found the tiny engraving etched into its side. He whispered the incantation through gritted teeth. The world died.

A wall of suffocating darkness detonated outward, swallowing the chamber whole. The lamplight, the cigar's ember, the glint of pistols—all vanished in an instant. Rabbit's vision alone remained. His eyes cut through the black like a knife. The first reaction was panic. A guard cursed, the click of a hammer cocking echoing unnervingly loud. Then came the thunder: deafening gunfire cracking in the dark, muzzle flashes reduced to smothered sparks instantly devoured by the void. Bullets ripped through the air, tearing splinters from the wooden walls, shredding curtains, ricocheting off the iron fixtures. One hissed past Rabbit's temple, so close the heat singed the edge of his hair. Another seared into his arm, tearing flesh, the pain immediate and blinding. He clenched his jaw so hard his teeth ached, forcing himself not to cry out. Then—a wet, meaty *thunk*. Pennwright roared, his voice shaking with fury. "*Get him!* Don't let him get away! Stop shooting me, you fucking idiots!"

The irony was delicious. The crime lord, shot by his own men in the blind chaos he'd unleashed. Rabbit almost laughed, but the pain in his arm reminded him survival came first. He should have run. The shadows begged him to slip away. But something inside him, some jagged shard of instinct—or madness—forced a different decision. He lunged. Rabbit's shoulder slammed into Pennwright's chest, driving him back into his chair, and then down onto the floor. The impact rattled through Rabbit's wounded arm, but he ignored it, his palm pressing hard against the bleeding shoulder where the bullet had torn through flesh. Oskar's breath hitched, his one visible eye going wide. The Umbral Eye beneath the patch seemed to *pulse,* furious, hungry, alive. Rabbit bent close, so close he could feel Pennwright's rancid breath against his cheek. "We are not enemies, Pennwright," he hissed, voice trembling but urgent. "Not today. Remember that."

Pennwright stared, stunned—not by the pain, not even by the betrayal of physics in this conjured dark, but by the audacity. By the *nerve.* And then, just as suddenly, the darkness thinned. The Veil's power dissipated like smoke in a breeze. Light seeped back in, silhouettes sharpening into shapes. The guards moved instantly, like wolves finally catching scent. They swarmed, seizing Rabbit by the arms and dragging him upright. One twisted his injured arm savagely, making him grit his teeth against a scream. Another pressed cold steel into his back. But before the execution order could fall, Oskar's voice cut through the chaos—harsh, pained, but commanding enough to freeze every trigger finger. "Stop."

The word echoed like a gavel strike. The guards hesitated, glancing between their wounded master and the man who had dared to touch him. Slowly, painfully, Oskar pushed himself to his feet. His expensive suit was ruined, blood soaking through the fabric, but his spine was straight, his eye burning into Rabbit's Foot with something venomous. Not rage. Not even hatred. Something more dangerous. Admiration. "I like you, kid," Oskar said, his voice low, almost begrudging, but laced with menace. "You've got balls. You'll be useful to me yet." Rabbit's heart rattled in his chest, torn between disbelief and dread. He'd expected death, but not this. Not a reprieve. Pennwright's lips curled into a grin, sharp as a blade. "I'll be kind to you, Victor. You have five minutes. A head start before my men start hunting you and your friends again."

The guards stiffened, some smirking, others visibly eager. Oskar raised his wrist and glanced at his watch. His grin widened. "This time, if I catch you, you won't survive." The ticking silence that followed was unbearable. Rabbit's Foot didn't need another word. He tore himself free and bolted, his boots hammering against the floor, every heartbeat screaming with the knowledge that the clock was already running. Behind him, Oskar's voice rang out, sing-song, cruel, playful as a knife pressed to the throat. "*Tick-tock, goes the clock…*" And the hunt began.

Rabbit's Foot ran like the ship itself had turned predator. Steel ribs blurred past on either side, pipes rattled overhead, and the deck underfoot thrummed with engine pulse—tick… tick… *tick*—a cruel metronome that made every step feel late. His breath tore at his throat. Blood slicked his sleeve where the bullet had grazed him; each swing of his arm splashed warmth

against his ribs. The memory of the glass box stalked him—purple vapor, fists against glass, the sound a man makes when lungs turn to knives. He threw himself into a side passage, boot soles skidding, caught the corner with his palm and—

—nearly collided with a uniformed shoulder. Jack. Rabbit's hands snapped up, gripping him by the lapels before he could even speak. "No time," he rasped, voice shredded. "We go. *Now.* I'll explain at base." Jack's eyes flicked over the blood on Rabbit's sleeve, the wild sheen in his stare. "Oskar?"

"Breathing. Pissed." Rabbit licked salt from his lips, mind racing. "Five minutes. Maybe less. Where are they?"

"Meeting room," Jack said, jaw tight. "They got in. They're sitting the auction. Door's watched."

"Damn it." Rabbit's gaze cut past Jack, as if he could see through bulkheads to the room below. "I'll peel a lifeboat. You fetch them. If we're not at starboard aft in—" He looked up, listened to the ship's heartbeat, did the math. "—four minutes, you jump. I don't care where. We'll find you." Jack nodded. No questions, no bravado—just movement. He spun on his heel and vanished down the corridor, the borrowed cap riding low over his brow. Rabbit ran. He took the crew stairs two at a time, boots slapping painted iron, shoulder-checking a swinging galley door into a storm of steam and onion. A cook shouted, a ladle clattered. Rabbit didn't stop. He snatched a marlinspike from a peg as he passed—a dull steel spike, heavy and honest—and palmed it like a promise. Up another ladder, throat burning, he burst onto an outer gangway. Cold air slapped him, sharp with salt and coal-smoke. The ship's skin loomed to his right, black and gleaming; to his left, a railing and the slick, dark sway of water. Lanterns hummed, casting a poisonous honey over wet boards. Music from the main salon bled through the bulkhead—a jaunty waltz at war with the hunt he could feel coiling behind his ribs.

Starboard aft. He needed davits, gripes, a painter, anything with a winch and a prayer. There: three lifeboats under canvas, bellies cinched to their cradles, davit arms canted inward like folded wings. The closest was clean and ready. The others… he could make very sure they weren't. He dropped to a knee and tore at the nearest canvas, fingers slipping once on his own blood before he found the ties and ripped them free. The tarp sloughed away with a burred whisper, revealing varnished slats, coiled line, a rust-polished crank. He checked the plug. Still in. Good. Painter line—good. He spun the gripes off the cleats with quick, practiced movements, then leaned in and cut the aftermost gripe halfway through with a savage twist of the marlinspike, weakening the strap without severing it—last-second sabotage for a pursuer who didn't know better. He staggered to the next boat, slashed the canvas once, twice, deep enough to fill it with sea in a minute, and jammed its crank with a pebble of iron he found wedged at the base of the davit. The third he left looking pristine but slipped the plug loose and set it delicately into the bilge—a silent disaster waiting to happen.

Tick.

He spun back to the first boat and cranked the davit. The arm sang low, rivets complaining. He flinched, listening for answering footsteps. None yet. Wind hissed across the deck. Somewhere above, a bell chimed once—shift change? Or Oskar's private signal?

Tick.

He lowered the boat a handwidth, set the brake, and whipped his head toward the companionway. Where the hell were they?

Jack bled into the meeting room like he belonged there. Uniform correct, cap low, chin up. The air inside tasted of velvet and money and the after-smell of panic no one would admit was panic.

The auction was in full fever—hands rising, digits flashed, coded nods exchanged like threats. The glass enclosure on stage was gone, wheeled off like a bad dream someone intended to sell twice. He found them in the back row—Harry in Alaric's face, Harleena in a guard's jacket cut too neatly for her shoulders. Both looked carved from ice. Harleena stood the instant Jack's shadow touched her boots. Her voice didn't tremble; it was steady in the way a blade is steady. "We are done." Harry didn't look at Jack. He whispered as if speaking might trigger a trap. "We have to leave. Now. They'll sweep the room once the gavel falls."

Jack didn't ask. His glance flicked to the side doors—two ushers and a private guard at each. The aisle up front? Exposed. The rear passage behind the tapestry? Staff only. Good. "Follow three paces." He cut down the side, Harleena on his shoulder like a true escort, Harry trailing with Alaric's sour swagger nailed to his bones. At the rear wall, Jack put his hand on the tapestry's edge and tugged. The fabric whispered. Behind it, a staff door: unmarked, the paint worn where palms had pushed it a thousand shifts. The nearest ship's guard looked up, brow pinched. "Hey. That door is—"

"Mr. Pennwright wants the air cleared for a VIP," Jack said, bored, already half through. "We're rerouting foot traffic." The guard's mouth opened to argue. Harleena turned her head a degree, the cold weight of her stare doing the rest. The man's jaw shut with an audible click, and he looked away. They slipped through into close, unlit space—the breath between walls. Pipes ran shoulder-height. The floor underfoot changed from silk-carpet hush to bare board honesty. The ship's spine was louder here, a vibrato in the soles. "Rabbit's on the boats," Jack breathed. "Starboard aft."

"How long?" Harry. Jack listened. The ship was a clock if you knew where to lay your ear. "Two minutes." They moved. The passage hair-pinned twice, then coughed them into a service corridor. Footsteps approached—two, maybe three. Jack raised a palm without looking back. Stop. He slid against the wall, waited until the rhythm presented a seam, then stepped out into the oncoming bodies like a man who owned hallways.

"Private escort. VIP fresh air." He didn't stop walking. He didn't give the crew time to remember they had orders too. The first man flattened himself against the bulkhead by reflex. The second started to speak and thought better of it. Harleena didn't break stride. Harry kept his Alaric scowl like a shield.

They hit a dogleg and a flight of iron steps. Harleena's palm landed against Jack's back for half a heartbeat, hard and steady, the sledge-hammer comfort of contact, then disappeared. The three of them climbed into brighter light, colder air, the tang of open water slipping like a knife under their collars.

"Come on," Rabbit whispered to the empty deck, because it felt better than whispering to time. He set the crank again. The davit squealed, then smoothed. The lifeboat kissed the rail, then tilted over the sea. He tied off the tackle and vaulted into the boat to check again—the plug in tight, oars ready, boathook under the thwart, a small locker with a storm lantern and a coil of line. The painter was secure to a forward cleat, thick and honest; he paid it out over his palm and made a quick figure-eight hitch on the thwart for fast release. Footsteps. Voices. He spun. Jack came first, shoulders square, eyes already cataloguing. Harry behind him, and Harleena—face pale, mouth drawn tight with a fury so cold it looked like calm. For half a second they looked like ghosts conjured by need. "In," Rabbit snapped. "Now."

No one argued. Jack took the bow without being told, checking the painter and the fall. Harleena dropped into the stern sheets, one hand already on an oar, jaw clenched, eyes cut toward the way they'd come. Harry swung into the middle, breath choppy, hands shaking as he peeled off

Alaric's expression like it was made of glue. A door banged open somewhere aft. Shouts. The pitch of voices you only hear when the hunt is sanctioned.

Tick.

"Hold," Jack said, low. "On my mark." Boots hit the deck behind them. A guard rounded the corner, saw uniforms and a familiar face from the floor (Alaric—Harry's borrowed mask), and hesitated. "You can't launch—" Harleena's stare pinned him to the bulkhead; Jack jerked his chin. "Private inspection. Mr. Pennwright wants it now." It worked for one heartbeat. Then the man's gaze slipped, narrowed, landed on Rabbit's blood-wet sleeve. His mouth opened. Rabbit ripped the hitch free and heaved the release. The boat dropped. It fell hard enough to punch the breath out of them, crane blocks whining, tackles screaming through sheaves. The hull hit water with a slap that shuddered up their spines. Spray shattered over the bow and came down cold. The boat yo-yoed once, twice, then settled into the sea, tugging at the painter like a dog at a leash. "Cut!" Jack barked. Rabbit already had the marlinspike at the line. He hammered it under the taught hemp and twisted. The painter parted with a sound like a gunshot. Above, a guard shouted, "Boat launch! Starboard aft!" Another voice—angrier, colder—snapped orders that scattered across the superstructure like thrown nails. "Row," Rabbit said.

Jack and Harleena dropped oars and pulled. The first stroke went wide, the second found the rhythm. The oars dipped, bit, and the little boat surged away from the hull's black curve. Wind tore tears from their eyes. The ship's flank loomed over them like a cliffface, lanterns blazing down in tiers, silhouettes leaning, pointing. Then the first shot came—high, a warning—or not. Wood splintered near the stern, flecks stinging Rabbit's neck. Harleena's head snapped but her hands didn't falter; she drove her oar deeper, teeth bared. Another crack—closer. A hole punched through the forward thwart with a neat, obscene cough. "Low," Jack said. "Heels on the keel. Pull." They tucked and hauled, the boat sliding into the ship's shadow where the muzzle flashes couldn't find them as easily. The smell of creosote and wet rope wrapped them. Water thudded against planks like a heavy hand. "Searchlights," Harry breathed, and the word was a prayer and a curse. A pencil of white scribbled across the water, hunting. Another snapped on, found only foam, skittered away. A bell clanged from the upper deck, and a whistle blew two short blasts.

"Other boats," Rabbit said, panting. He twisted to look back and saw three silhouettes starting to move on the davits they'd sabotaged. The first dropped clean; the second lurched and stuck, crank jammed, curses flying; the third hit the water and immediately began to sag under the tear in its canvas, taking on the ocean like a drunk taking on a dare. "Thank you," Jack muttered to no one and everyone. The clean boat kissed water and swung around, oars flashing. Men shouted. A searchlight raked low and found them—just a smear of white on black, a flash of oar blade, a glint off Rabbit's wet sleeve—and stuck. "Left!" Rabbit barked. "Hard left!" Jack buried his oar and dragged; Harleena matched him instantly. The boat slewed, slapped side-on into a chop, then straightened, running along the Lounge's hull, hugging the dark. Another shot. A bullet tore a splinter off the gunwale by Rabbit's knee and took a piece of his trouser with it. He tasted metal, didn't know if it was blood or fear.

"Smoke," Harry said suddenly, voice tight. "What?" Jack. Harry tore a cork from the storm lantern, sloshed a splash of oil into the bilge, and flung the rest into the sea in a bright sheet. He struck the wheel, the flint sparked, nothing—again—caught, the flame so small it was an insult—and then the oil took elsewhere, a low lick on the surface twenty yards off that puffed into a wider curtain as the slick spread. Not much. But in the light, enough. The searchlight swung toward the glow, indecisive. Men shouted to adjust. Rabbit didn't wait. "Now," he said, voice a thread. "Out of the shadow. One big push."

Oars dipped. Wood creaked. They heaved, backs and legs and fury. The little boat surged from under the Lounge's overhang into black water beyond, then slid behind the rising veil of smoke and steam thrown from the ship's stacks. The world became a smudge—white beam, gray fog, black night, the ship's lights turning to diffuse halos that couldn't quite land on them. "Keep her straight," Jack whispered, as if the ship might hear him and correct. Harleena's breath hissed between her teeth, not from fear; from restraint. When a shot cracked and stitched a line an inch from Jack's shoulder, she flinched toward him on reflex before she crushed the motion back into bone and pulled harder. The oar thumped, bit, pulled them another two lengths into dark. The pursuing boat hit the water wrong—Rabbit heard it, a slap and a curse—and then the canvas of the third lifeboat gave entirely, drowning its men in a sudden waterfall that bought the Crows the width of a heartbeat.

Tick.

The Lounge's bulk receded by inches, then feet. The searchlights roved without conviction now, circles on nothing. A siren wound up and down, the sound skittering across the surface like thrown wire. Somewhere high on the aft deck, a figure stepped to the rail—a compact silhouette with a cane and a line of white where a patch cleaved his face in two. Rabbit didn't need light to feel the weight of that gaze; it pressed the back of his skull like a hand. "Row," he said, even though they were already rowing. They put the ship behind them. The smoke became mist, then night. The only sounds left were oars in locks, lungs like bellows, and the water's low slap along the planks. "Count me down," Jack said, voice steadying by will alone. Rabbit looked over his shoulder at the shrinking lights, tasted salt, blood, coal. He pictured Oskar's watch face, tinny and precise. "One minute," he said. "Maybe less." Harleena didn't look back. She just pulled, and in the hard line of her mouth there was something new—fury, yes, but also the steadiness of a vow.

Harry swallowed. "Adrian—" he started, and couldn't finish the sentence. Jack's answer was simple. "We saw enough." They rowed until the Lounge was only a rumor of light behind coal-fog. Then they rowed farther, because rumors can still kill you. Only when Rabbit could no longer feel the Eye on his neck did he let himself exhale through his teeth and whisper, "Head for the river mouth. No lanterns. No talking. We keep the current, and we keep breathing."

Tick.

The clock hadn't stopped. But for the first time since the Veil fell, the seconds were theirs. The Black Marrow Lounge sank back into the fog like a bad dream losing interest. Only the oars spoke: wood in iron, iron on wood. Spray stitched their coats; coal-smoke from the stacks lay thin on the tongue. No one wanted to be the first to give the night a shape. Harleena was the one who broke it. She didn't look at any of them—just out over the black pane of water, voice small in a way that made Jack's chest ache. "We lost him," she said. "Adrian." The name landed like a stone. "I didn't think… not like that." Jack's hands kept the rhythm, steady in the locks. "What happened in there?" he asked, low. "I saw the room. Not the… show."

Harry swallowed. His Alaric mask had slipped; what was left on his face was all boy and too much seeing. "They put him in a glass box," he said, each word trimmed to the bone. "With an ape. A sphere—Ladher—opened, filled the box. Purple vapor. Thirty minutes if it's pure, they said. It was less." He stared at his knuckles, flexed them like they might shake something off. "I never trusted Adrian. Not really. But… no one deserves that." Harleena nodded once, the motion brittle. "It wasn't a fight," she added, voice flat. "It was a lesson. For us."

Rabbit's Foot kept his head down, palm clamped over the blood-slick crease on his arm, eyes fixed on the dark ahead like the river might answer if he stared hard enough. "It was a sales pitch," he said, and the words came out colder than the air. "And it worked." He finally looked up

at Jack. “Remember the train? The bomb in the crate? That was a cough compared to this. If Merrow isn’t stopped, this is Doskvol’s future: rooms full of money buying the right to choose who chokes and when.” Jack’s jaw set. “Merrow tied to this how?”

“Meeting was about Ladher,” Rabbit said. “And what comes after it. A cure whispered like a rumor with a price. They didn’t say his name, not out loud—but the whole night had his handwriting on it. Organized. Cruel.” He hesitated. “Oskar’s Eye is real. He didn’t need names. He just… knew.” Jack’s eyes flicked to him. “You saw Pennwright.”

“Pennwright saw me,” Rabbit answered, which wasn’t the same thing. “Called me by my real one.” A brief, joyless smile. “Don’t ask how. The Eye gets into places doors don’t. He gave us a head start because he could. That’s all you need for now.” Harleena’s fingers whitened around the oar, tendons stark in the lantern haze. “I want him,” she whispered—not a plan, a vow. “Not tonight. But I want him.” Harry’s voice came small through the damp. “That box… it’s going to happen again, isn’t it? Different rooms. Different names.”

“Unless we make the room burn first,” Jack said. The way he said it wasn’t bravado; it was math. They fell quiet. The oars creaked. Far behind, a searchlight wandered the fog with a drunk’s persistence and then gave up. Ahead, the city’s teeth began to show—derricks and chimneys, the soft smear of lantern lines, Doskvol pretending to be asleep. Rabbit tipped his head back and let the cold bite his throat. “We hit shore and disappear,” he said. “No taverns. No talk. Straight to the hospital. Jim Bob shuts the door and forgets our names. We dump these clothes, wash twice, and I want every hand that touched that room scoured clean.” Jack nodded once. Harleena finally dragged her gaze off the water and met Jack’s for the first time since the cave. Whatever forgiveness wasn’t there, something else was—shared nausea, shared purpose. “Lazarus needs to hear what this is,” she said. “Mitch too. If this spreads, he’ll see it before we do.” Harry shivered, though the wind had eased. “We can’t go back to the way things were,” he murmured. “Not after tonight.”

“We don’t,” Rabbit said. He looked past them, past the boat, past the river, to the black ribbon of streets that would take them home or swallow them. “From now on, every move is either toward stopping Merrow… or toward a city that dies in a glass box.” The lifeboat slid into the lee of a rotting pier, boards yawning like bad teeth. The oars went still. In the hush that followed, the only sounds were the drip of river off the blades and the slow, tired breathing of four people who had outlived their luck by five minutes and a thread. “On three,” Jack said, voice bringing them back to the small work of living. “Quiet. Fast. No footprints.”

They counted, and on three the Crows rose together—hurt, furious, unslept—and lifted the weight of what they’d seen into the dark with them. Behind them, somewhere out on the water, a clock they couldn’t see kept time for men who would rather buy doom than fear it. Ahead, the city waited—hungry, listening.

They went to meet it.

Dramatis Personae & Factions at a Glance

The Crows (our crew)

- **Jack** — Planner of the crows, ambitious member. The Slide of the group.
- **Harleena** — The Hound of the Family, an experienced hunter of both men and animals.
- **Rabbit's Foot** — The Gambler, a weaver of fates. Respected member.
- **Harry** — Young sorcerer, learns fast and has a lot to prove.

Allies & Associates

- **Dr. Lazarus Finch** — Surgeon; keeps secrets stitched.
- **Dr. Mitch Rich** — Calm hands, jumpy heart; Lazarus's shadow.
- **Jim Bob** — Door, discretion, and a perfect memory.
- **Nicolas Nightwood** — Broker of whispers at the Shadow's Den. Apparent leader of Enigma group.
- **Jackie Comber "the Mist"** — Unseen leader, enigmatic commander of shadows.
- **Constant** — Powerful and experienced mage, lone contractor.
- **Tobias Ford** — Redeemed "Nyctarch"; eyes in velvet rooms.
- **Elara Voss** — Skarrenfolk organizer; favors return with interest.

Powers & Adversaries

- **Merrow Valesque** — Smiling catastrophe; Leader of the Royal Family. Linked with Ladher/Lædir.
- **Captain Morian Ishtar** — Imperial Police Captain; law with teeth.
- **Oskar Pennwright** — The Black Marrow's king; Eye beneath the patch.
- **Ember Circle** — Aristocratic arsonists; Emberlash lights their sermons.
- **Gloam Sisters** — Witch-matriarchs; their shade remembers you.
- **Cyphers (Lannic Morrow)** — Tech guild; uneasy ally with teeth.
- **Imperial Police** — Lantern squads, paperwork, unforgiving boots.

Places that Matter

- **Crow's Ward Safehouse & Hospital** — The Crows' heart, beating in secret.
- **Gaddwick Station** — Train station of Doskvol
- **Deadland Woods** — Curses, shapes, and Comber's Grove.
- **Lantern Walk** — Fences, whispers, unlucky meetings.
- **Night Market** — Freight, marks, and midnight coin.
- **Black Marrow Lounge** — Floating casino; deals that drown cities.
- **The Bend at Gaddwick** — Where the train learned fear.

The Chapter List

Chapter 1: Knock Once, Run Forever
Harry, Rabbit's Foot, and Jack meet for the first time and form a crew. They are hired by Márcio Keel to free a prisoner from the governor's house—only to discover that the man is none other than Merrow Valesque, the terror of Doskvol. The Crows cross paths with Captain Morian Ishtar himself, setting the stage for future rivalries.

Chapter 2: A Symphony of Schemes
Arthur Xavier recruits the new crew for a job with the Cyphers, a criminal group specializing in steampunk technology, led by Lannic Morrow. Their mission is to steal a prototype at the grand invention fair. The heist turns chaotic when Bruce Wallunde, a bounty hunter searching for the stolen Umbral Rod, ambushes them. (The same Umbral Rod that Harry had stolen from Morian in the previous mission.) Harleena is introduced here, and the Crows earn favor with the Cyphers by completing the mission.

News: Mystery Unfolds at Local Science Fair: Bounty Hunter Arrested, Invention Unveiled Amidst Chaos
Agnes and Thomas discuss the shocking headlines that spread across Doskvol.

Chapter 3: Skyward Skirmish: A Race Above Doskvol
The crew earns their name—the Crows—and competes in Pennwright's infamous illegal balloon race. They secretly help the Stoneborn kids, Dadinho and Cuzão, while also fulfilling a mission for Elara Voss of the Skarrenfolk refugees. The Stoneborn remain suspicious of the Crows, but the Skarrenfolk and even Lord Veylock become allies. By winning the race, however, the Crows make a powerful new enemy: the Ember Circle.

Chapter 4: A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey
The Crows secure a full alliance with the Cyphers. They also learn that the Gloam Sisters now want them captured—dead or alive. Their mission is to move Lannic's prototype across town to Gaddwick Station, with help from Constant (Conrad Rian), Adrian Blackwood, and Silas Thorn. At the finish line, they are ambushed by both the Ember Circle and the Gloam Sisters. When they return home, they find their hideout has been attacked, pointing to a traitor in their midst.

News: Chaos Erupts in Doskvol: Monsters, Fire, and Death at Gaddwick Station
Thear and Vesper discuss the catastrophe at the station. The Crows are directly blamed, dividing the city between those who believe they are innocent and those who believe they are guilty.

Chapter 5: The Forgotten Relic – Part 1
With their reputation in tatters, the Crows agree to lay low by helping Constant retrieve the Umbral Ring from the Deadlands. Along the way, they encounter Márcio once again, who has escaped prison. He tells them it was destiny that brought them together—and reveals that Merrow Valesque is the key to Doskvol's destruction. The Crows must capture Merrow alive and uncover his connection to a mysterious virus called Ladher.

Chapter 6: The Forgotten Relic – Part 2
During the recovery of the Umbral Ring, Rabbit's Foot learns a devastating prophecy: he must die. This revelation scars the group deeply and fractures the trust between them.

Story: The Unforgiven Path of Constant
A side story revealing Constant's struggle with the Umbral Ring and how it saved the soul of his sister.

Chapter 7: The Draft Under the Door

Haunted by their time in the Deadlands, Rabbit begins a personal investigation into Merrow Valesque and his old gang, the Royal Family. He discovers they were once such a threat that it took an unlikely alliance—the Imperial Police, the Gloam Sisters, and the Ember Circle—to bring them down. A stray cat begins following Rabbit home.

Chapter 8: The Deadland Express

While Rabbit is away, the Crows still need coin. Jack convinces the others to pull off a dangerous train heist. The shocking conclusion reminds them that danger lurks in every shadow.

News: Terror at the Door of Doskvol: Train Hijacked in Broad Daylight

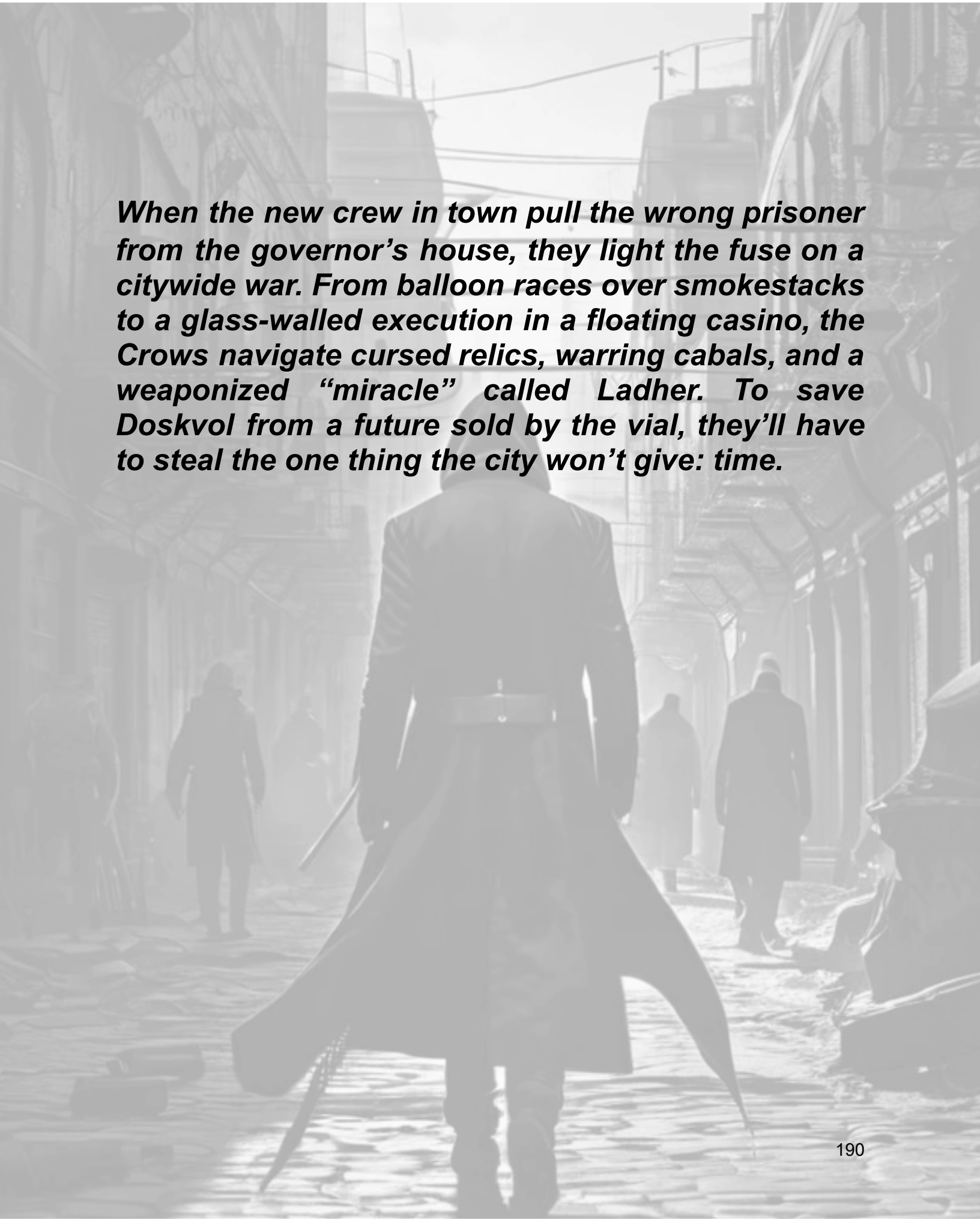
Police officers Tib Voss and Rick Mallone discuss the hijacking and its implications for the city.

Story: Shadows of the Underworld

Márcio's body is delivered to the Crows' underground medical center. Dr. Lazarus and his assistant Mich uncover the terrible truth about the Ladher virus: it is an unstoppable scientific threat, and Doskvol is not prepared.

Chapter 9: The Black Marrow Infiltration

Pressured by Jackie Comber of the Unseen, the Crows meet Nicolas Nightwood and infiltrate the Black Marrow Lounge. There, they witness firsthand the terrifying power and control of Osvald Pennwright—and the horrific demonstration of Ladher. This chilling display reveals the true scope of the danger awaiting Doskvol.



When the new crew in town pull the wrong prisoner from the governor's house, they light the fuse on a citywide war. From balloon races over smokestacks to a glass-walled execution in a floating casino, the Crows navigate cursed relics, warring cabals, and a weaponized "miracle" called Ladher. To save Doskvol from a future sold by the vial, they'll have to steal the one thing the city won't give: time.